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THE VENETIANS

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "VIXEN,"

"ISHMAEL," ETC.

WITH THE PUBLISHERS' COMPLIMENTS.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

LONDON

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THE VENETIANS.



CHAPTER I.

IN THE CITY BY THE SEA.

LITTLE golden cloudlets, like winged living creatures, were hanging high up in the rosy glow above Santa Maria della Salute, and all along the Grand Canal the crowded gondolas were floating in a golden haze, and all the westward-facing palace windows flashed and shone with an illumination which the lamps and lanterns that were to be lighted after sundown could never equal, burnt they never so merrily. It was Shrove Tuesday in Venice, Carnival time. The sun had been shining on the city and on the lagunes all day long. It was one of those

Shrove Tuesdays which recall the familiar proverb—

“Sunshine at Carnival,
Fireside at Easter.”

But who cares about the chance of cold and gloom six weeks hence when to-day is fair and balmy? A hum of joyous, foolish voices echoed along those palace façades, and floated out seaward, and rang along the narrow Calle, and drifted on the winding water-ways, and resounded under the innumerable bridges; for everywhere in the City by the Sea men, women, and children were making merry, and had given themselves up to a wild and childish rapture of unreasoning mirth, ready to explode into loud laughter at the sorriest jokes. An old man tapped upon the shoulder by a swinging paper lantern—a boy whose hat had been knocked off—a woman calling to her husband or her lover across the gay flotilla—anything was food for mirth on this holiday evening, while the great gold orb sank in the silvery lagoon, and all the sky yonder towards Chioggia was steeped in the crimson after-glow, and the Chioggian fishing-boats were moving

westward in all the splendour of their painted sails.

At Danieli's the hall and staircase, reading-room, smoking-room, and saloons were crowded with people; English and American for the most part, but with a sprinkling of French and German. Shrewd Yankees were bargaining on the sea-washed steps below the hall-door with gondoliers almost as shrewd. *Quanto per la notte—tutte la notte, sul canale?* To-night the gondoliers would have it all their own way, for every one wanted a gondola to row up and down the Grand Canal, with gaudy Chinese lanterns, and singing men, and that song which is almost the national melody of Venice *fin de siècle*—"Funicoli, funicola."

The dining-rooms at Danieli's are spacious enough for all ordinary occasions, but to-night there was not sitting room for half the number who wanted to dine. The waiters were flying about wildly, trying to appease the hungry crowd with promises of *tables subito, subito*. But travellers in Italy know what *subito* means in an Italian restaurant, and were not comforted by these assurances. Amiable Signor Campi moved

about among his men, and his very presence gave comfort somehow, and finally everybody had food and wine, and a din of jovial voices rose up from the table d'hôte to the spacious old rooms above, on that upper story which is called the noble floor, a place of strange histories, perhaps, in those stern days when these hotels were palaces.

The ubiquitous Signor Campi was near the door when a gondola stopped at the bottom of the steps, and two ladies came tripping up into the hall, followed by a young man who was evidently English, handsome, tall, broad-shouldered, and clad in a travelling suit of rough grey cloth, whose every line testified to the excellence of an English tailor.

The ladies were as evidently not English, and they had a Carnival air which was totally different from the gaiety of the American young ladies in their neat tailor gowns, or the English ladies in their table d'hôte silks. One wore ruby plush, with a train which trailed on the wet steps as she came up to the door. The other wore black velvet, with a wide yellow sash loosely knotted round a supple waist. The ruby lady

was masked, the black velvet lady dangled her lace-fringed mask on the end of a finger, and looked boldly round the crowded hall with her big black eyes—eyes which reflected the lamp-light in their golden splendour.

Signor Campi was at the Englishman's side before the ladies could get further than the threshold.

"You were thinking of dining with those two ladies, sir?" he inquired, in excellent English.

"Certainly. You can give us a private room, if you like."

"There is not a room in the house unoccupied;" and then, in a lower voice, Signor Campi murmured—"Quite impossible. Those ladies cannot dine here."

The Englishman laughed lightly.

"You are not fond of your own countrywomen, it seems, Monsieur Campi;" and then to the hall-porter, "Keep that gondola, will you?" and then in Italian, to the larger lady in ruby plush, who might have been mother or aunt to the lovely girl in black velvet, "They have no room for us anywhere. We should have to wait ages for our dinner. Shall we try a restaurant?"

"Yes, yes," cried the girl eagerly. "Ever so much more fun. Let us go to the Black Hat. No gha megio casa per el disnar."

"Where is the Black Hat?"

"On the Piazza. We often dine there, la Zia and I. We shan't want the gondola, it is only five minutes' walk."

"Shall I engage him for the evening?"

"No, no. You are going to take us to the opera."

"As you will."

He offered the girl his arm, and left la Zia to follow him across the hall to the door opening on to the quay of the slaves—that quay whose stones are beaten nowadays chiefly by the footsteps of light-hearted travellers drunken with the enchantment of Venice. They crossed the bridge, the girl hanging on the young man's arm, chatting gaily, and holding up her long black skirt with the other hand, revealing glimpses of feet and ankles which were far from fairy-like, feet that had been widened by the flip-flopping shoe which the damsel had worn when she was a lace-maker on the island of Burano.

If he wanted a good dinner—a real Venetian

dinner—nowhere would he get it better than at the sign of the Black Hat, and good wine into the bargain, the girl told her cavalier.

They turned by the Vine Corner, and then threaded their way along the crowded Piazzetta, whence the sacred pigeons had been banished by the tumult of the noisy throng. They crossed the Piazza in front of St. Mark's Moorish domes, and entered a low doorway under the colonnade, only a few paces from the Torre del Orologio, with its azure and golden clock and its bronze giants to beat the time. At the end of a long, narrow, and somewhat smelly passage, they found themselves in a low-ceiled room where there were numerous small tables, and where the heat from the flare of the gas, and the steam of cooked viands, was too suggestive of the torrid zone for absolute comfort.

The waiters were evidently devoted to the dark-eyed Si'ora in black and yellow, for room was speedily found where there was no room. Some diners were hustled away from a snug little table in a corner by a window, where by opening one side of the casement one might get a breath of cool air—flavoured by sewage, but still a boon.

"May I order the dinner?" pleaded the dark eyes, smiling at the young man in rough grey woollen, while la Zia looked about her, turning her head to survey the groups of diners at the tables in the rear.

The waiter set a huge flask of Chianti on the table unbidden, and stood, napkin in hand, waiting for Fiordelisa's orders. Fiordelisa was the name of the dark-eyed damsel, who to her cavalier's eye looked as if she had just stepped out of a story in the Decameron.

She ordered the dinner, discussing the menu confidentially with the waiter; she ordered, and the dishes came, and they all ate, Vansittart being too hungry to be daintily curious as to the food set before him after a long day on the lagoons and an afternoon on the Lido, and all the fun and riot of the Grand Canal at sunset. He never knew of what his dinner at the Black Hat was composed, except that he ate some oysters and drank a pint of white wine, and helped to dispose of a couple of bottles of champagne—which he ordered in lieu of the big flask of Chianti—that they began with a frittura of fish like minnows, and that the most substantial

dish which the brisk waiter brought them was a savoury mess of macaroni, with shreds of meat or choppings of liver mixed up in an unctious gravy. Lisa was in high spirits, and ate ravenously, and drank a good many glasses of the sparkling wine, and told him, half in broken English and half in her Venetian dialect, of the old days when she had worked in the lace factory, where her earnings were about seven soldi per diem, and where she lived chiefly on polenta.

This was the only knowledge Mr. Vansittart had of her history, since he had only made her acquaintance three or four hours ago at the concert hall on the Lido, where he had invited this young person and her aunt to take coffee with him, and whence he had brought them back to Venice in his gondola. He knew nothing of their histories and characters, cared to know nothing, had no idea of seeing them ever again after this Carnival day. He had taken them to his hotel without stopping to consider the wisdom of such a course, thinking to feast them in one of those grand upper rooms overlooking the broad sweep of water between St. Mark's and St. George the Greater, meaning to feast them

upon Signor Campi's best; but Signor Campi had willed otherwise, and here they were feasting just as merrily upon a savoury mess of macaroni and chopped liver at the sign of the Black Hat.

After the savoury dishes Fiordelisa began upon pastry, with an appetite as of a giant refreshed. She rested her elbow on the table, and the loose sleeve of her velveteen gown rolled back and showed the round white arm. All the little crinkly curls danced upon her pure white forehead and over her dancing eyes as she ate chocolate éclairs and creamy choux to her heart's content, while Vansittart thought what a pretty creature she was, and what a pity Mr. Burgess was not there to sketch her, with all the eager life in her changeful face, and fix that gay and brilliant image upon canvas for ever.

Vansittart was not in love with this chance acquaintance of an idle afternoon. He was only delighted with her. She amused, she fascinated him, just as he was amused and fascinated by this enchanting city of Venice, which had always the same charm and the same glamour for him, come here at what season he might. She impressed him with a sense of her beauty, just

as one of those wonderful pictures in the Venetian Academy would have done.

His heart was unmoved by this sensuous, brilliant, earthly loveliness. Her vulgarity, all her words and gestures essentially of the people, amused and interested him, yet kept him worlds away from her.

He was rich, idle, alone in Venice, and he thought it was his right to amuse himself to the uttermost at this Carnival season. That offer of a cup of coffee, arising out of mutual laughter at some absurdities among the crowd, had been the beginning of the friendliest relations.

He strolled on the loose, level sands with Lisa and her aunt, those sands over which Byron used to ride, the poet of whose existence Lisa had never heard, yet who had wasted lightest hours with just such girls as Lisa. And then how could he go back to Venice alone in his gondola and leave this black-eyed girl and her chaperon to struggle for standing room among the crowd on the twopenny steamer, in their fine clothes and jewels, those jewels in which lower-class Venetians love to invest their savings? No; it was the most natural thing in life to offer

them seats in his gondola, and then to see the fun of the Grand Canal in their company ; and what young man with his note-case plethoric with limp Italian notes, and a reserve of English bank-notes in a close-buttoned pocket, could refrain from offering dinner, and then, hearing that Lisa was pining to go to the opera, a box at that entertainment? No sooner had she expressed her desire, while they were on the Grand Canal, than he sent off a Venetian guide, whom he knew of old, to engage a stage box for the evening.

Fiordelisa told him about the old life at Burano, while she devoured her pastry, the aunt listening placidly, replete with dinner and champagne, caring for nothing except that those old days were a thing of the past, and that neither she nor her handsome niece need toil or starve any more—not for the present, at any rate ; perhaps never. La Zia was not a woman to peer curiously into the future while the present gave her a good lodging and meat and drink.

The girl talked her Venetian, and Vansittart, who had spent most of his holidays in Italy, and had a quick ear for dialects, was able to under-

stand her. Now and then she spoke English, better than he would have expected from her youthful ignorance.

“How is it that you can talk English, Signorina mia, and how is it that you left Burano?” he asked in Italian.

“For one and the same reason. A young English gentleman fell in love with me, and brought my aunt and me to Venice, and is having me educated, in order to marry me and take me to England with him.”

Vansittart did not believe in the latter half of the story, but he was too polite to express his doubt.

“Oh, you are being educated up to our idea of the British matron, are you, *bella mia*?” he said, smiling at her, as she wiped her coral lips with the coarse serviette, and flung herself back in her chair, satiated with sweets. “And pray in what does the education consist?”

“I am learning to play on the mandoline. A little old man with a cracked voice comes to our lodgings twice a week to teach me—and we sing duets, ‘*La ci darem*’ and ‘*Sul aria*.’”

“The mandoline. Ah, that is your English

friend's notion of education," said Vansittart, laughing. "Well, I dare say that it is as good as Greek or Latin, or the science that gave Giordano Bruno such a bad time in this very city."

He leant back with his head in an angle of the wall, idle, amused, interested, taking life as it seemed to him life ought to be taken—very lightly.

He had been in Venice only a few days, days of sunshine and sauntering in gondolas to this or the other island, to dream away an idle afternoon. It was his third visit, and he seemed to know every stone of the city almost as well as Ruskin—every palace front and Saracenic window, every mouldering flight of steps, every keystone of every bridge which he passed under almost every day with lazy motion, drifting as the cabbage leaves and egg-shells drifted on the turbid waters of the narrow way. He never stayed very long anywhere, being free to wander as he pleased at his present stage of existence, and having a dim foreshadowing of the time when he would not be free, when he would be bound and fettered by domestic ties, and travel-

ling would be altogether a different business from this casual rambling. He pictured himself at the head of his breakfast table discussing the summer holiday with his wife, while perhaps his mother-in-law sat by and put various spokes into the family wheel, opposing every preference of his on principle.

He would have to marry some day, he knew. It was an obligation laid upon him together with the family seat and comfortable income to which he had succeeded before his two-and-twentieth birthday. The thing would have to be done—but he meant to delay the evil hour as long as he could, and to be monstrously exacting as to the fairy princess for whose dear sake he should put on those domestic fetters.

He had enjoyed this particular visit to Venice with a keener relish than either of his previous visits. Though the year was still young, the weather had been exceptionally lovely. Sun, moon, and stars had shed all that they have of glory or of glamour over the romantic city, painting the smooth lagoons with a rare splendour of colouring which changed city and sea into something supernal, unimaginable, dreamlike.

His windows at Danieli's looked over an enchanted sea, where the great modern Peninsular and Oriental steamer moored between the Riva and St. George the Greater seemed an anachronism in iron. All else was fairylike, historic, mediæval.

The steamer was to sail for Alexandria in the afternoon, they had told him, whenever he made any inquiry about her; but the days and afternoons had gone, and she was still lying there, blocking out a little bit of the opposite island and the famous church.

"And so you sing as well as play, Fiordelisa?" he asked, presently, after a silence in which they all three smoked their cigarettes.

"Sing! I should think she did sing," answered the aunt. "She warbles like a nightingale. Signor Zefferino, her master, says she ought to come out at the opera."

Vansittart smiled. Idle flattery on the maestro's part, no doubt; the flattery of the small parasite who knows where the macaroni is savouriest, and where the salad reeks with oil.

And yet, if this girl sang at all, she should sing sweetly. Those dark, sunny eyes of hers gave promise of the artistic temperament. The

tones that came from that round, full throat, ivory white against the tawdry black and yellow of her gown, should be rich and ripe.

He asked no questions about her English lover. Had he been ever so little in love with her himself he would have been full of curiosity—but for this flower of a day, this beautiful stranger, with whom he ate and drank and made merry to-night, and whom he might never see again, he had no serious concern. He cared not who were her friends or followers; whether the life she lived were good or evil. She had a fresh youthfulness, a look of almost childlike innocence, in spite of her tousled hair and tawdry raiment, and although Signor Campi's keen eye had condemned her. The aunt, too, fat, common, too fine for respectability, seemed a harmless old thing. No word of evil had come from her lips. She had not the air of laying snares for the stranger's feet. She thought of nothing but the enjoyment of the moment.

"Pray, where may your Englishman be to-day?" asked Vansittart, as it flashed upon his lazy temper that there might be peril in such a city as Venice in being seen with another man's

sweetheart. "Why didn't he escort you to the Lido?"

"He went to Monte Carlo a fortnight ago," she answered. "I am afraid he is a gambler."

"Is he rich?"

"No, not as you English count riches. He is rich for a Venetian. He gave la Zia and me our gowns—she chose red, I black—last Christmas. There are few Venetians who would give such handsome presents. He is very generous."

"Yes, he is very generous," echoed the aunt.

"It is time we went to the opera," cried Fior-delisa. "I want to be there at the beginning."

The opera was "Don Giovanni," the company third-rate; but they sang well enough to lull la Zia into a comfortable slumber and to lift Lisa to the seventh heaven. She sat with clasped hands, listening in a rapture of content. She only unclasped her hands to applaud vehemently when the house applauded. The theatre was crowded, the audience were noisy, but Fiordelisa craned her long neck out of the box to listen, and drank in every note with those quick ears of hers, and was perhaps almost the only person in the Rossini Theatre that night who listened intently:

but before the second act was over the crowd and the heat had increased to such a degree that women were fainting in the boxes, and even Fiordelisa was resigned to leaving before "Don Giovanni" was half done. She wanted to walk in the Piazza before the shops were shut, or the crowd began to thin, or the bands ceased playing.

There was to be a masked ball at the same theatre on the following night.

"Shall I take you to the ball, Lisa?" asked Vansittart, as they came out of the heat and the glare into the cool softness of a Venetian night.

"No, I don't care about dancing. I only care for the opera. The girls at Burano were mad about dancing, but I liked to hear the organ at High Mass better than all their dances."

Vansittart thought of bidding his new friends good night at the door of the theatre. Had Venice not been Venice, and had there been any vehicles in waiting, he would have put his fair companions into a coach, paid their fare, and bade them good night for ever, without so much as inquiring where they lived. But Venice has a romantic unlikeness to every other city. There was no coach. To say good night and leave

them to walk home unescorted was out of the question.

"In which direction is your house, Signora?" he asked the elder lady.

"Oh, we are not going home," cried Fiordelisa. "We are going to the Piazza. This is the time when there will be most fun. You'll take us with you?" she asked, slipping her hand through his arm, boldly taking possession of him. "Come, come, aunt, we are going to the Piazza."

Her feet threaded the narrow ways so swiftly that Vansittart scarcely knew by which particular windings of the labyrinth they came to the Bocca di Piazza, and emerged from the shadow of the pillars upon the broad open square, all aflame with lamps and lanterns, and one roar of multitudinous voices, squeaking punchinellos, barking dogs, blaring trumpets, tinkling guitars. They pushed their way through the crowd, the two women masked, each hanging on to his arm, and making progress difficult.

The Piazza was a spectacle to remember, full of life and movement, a military band braying out brazen music, music of Offenbach, loud, martial, insistent, above the multifarious squeak-

ings and shoutings, the laughter and the clamour of the crowd. In the long colonnades the throng pushed thickly; but Vansittart had been one of the strong men of the 'Varsity, a thrower of hammers, a jumper of long jumps, a man with a name that was famous at Lillie Bridge as well as at Oxford. He parted the throng as if it had been water, and would have made his way quickly to the brightest, largest, and gayest of the caffès, if it had not been for Lisa, who hung back to look at the lighted shop windows, windows that she could have seen any night of her life, but which had a particular attraction at Carnival time.

The touters were touting at the shop doors, with that smiling persistence which makes the *Procuratie Vecchie* odious, and recalls Cranbourne Alley in the dark ages. Lisa made a dead stop before a shop where gaudy wooden negroes, garish with crude colour and much gilding, were grilling in the glare of the gas. It was a kind of bazaar, half Venetian, half Moorish, and one window was full of bead necklaces and barbaric jewels. At these Lisa looked with such childish longing eyes that Vansittart would have been

hard as a stone if he had not suggested making a selection from that sparkling display of rainbow glass and enamel.

The spider at the door was entreating the flies to go into his web, a young Venetian with great, smiling black eyes and a Jewish nose—a lineal descendant of Jessica, perhaps—a very agreeable young spider, entreating the Signora and Signorina to go in and look about them. There would be no necessity for them to buy. “To look costs nothing.”

They all three went in. Fiordelisa fastened upon a tray of jewels, and lost herself in a bewilderment as to which of all those earrings, brooches, and necklaces she most desired. Vansittart was interested in the Moorish things—the bronze cups, the gold and scarlet slippers, the embroidered curtains, and, most of all, the daggers, of which there were many curious shapes, in purple-gleaming Damascus steel.

While Fiordelisa and her aunt were choosing brooches and necklaces—necklaces which by a double twist became bracelets—Vansittart was cheapening daggers, and, as a young man of ample means, ended by buying the dearest and

perhaps the best, a really serviceable knife, in a red velvet sheath.

He paid for as many things as Lisa cared to choose; for a bead necklace and an enamel brooch; for a square of gold-striped gauze to twist about her head and shoulders; for a dainty little pair of Moorish shoes which might admit Lisa's toes, but which would certainly leave the major part of her substantial foot out in the cold; for a gilded casket to hold her jewels—for a fan—for a gilt thimble—and for a little set of Algerian coffee-cups for her aunt.

All these things were to be sent next morning to the Signora's lodgings near the Ponte di Rialto. Vansittart paid the bill, which disposed of a good many of his limp Italian notes, put his dagger in his breast-pocket, and left the shop, cutting short the compliments and thanks of the Venetian youth.

The Caffè Florian—of which tradition tells that it closeth not day or night, winter or summer—was filled with people and ablaze with light. Lisa pushed her way to a table, making good use of those fine shoulders and elbows of hers, and a little group of men who had finished

their coffee got up and made way for the brilliant black eyes, and the red lips, which the little velvet mask did not hide. Those finely moulded lips looked all the lovelier for the fringe of lace that shadowed them, and the white teeth flashed as she smiled her thanks.

She talked loud, and laughed gaily while she sipped her chocolate. Vansittart himself was somewhat exhilarated by champagne, music, and two or three little glasses of cognac taken between the acts at the Rossini Theatre, and he was unashamed of his companion's laughter and general exuberance, even although she was attracting the attention of every one within earshot. Beauty and vivacity are not attributes to make a man ashamed of his companion, although she may be only a Burnano lace-worker disguised in a tawdry velvet gown.

"Show me the dagger you chose after all your bargaining," she said, leaning over towards him, with her elbows on the table.

He obeyed. She drew the dagger from its sheath and looked at it critically. The red velvet sheath, embroidered with gold, took her fancy much more than the damascened blade.

"It is too heavy to wear in one's hair," she said, throwing down the sheath, and taking up the weapon.

"Take care. The blade is as sharp as a razor. It is not by any means an ornament for a lady's toilette table. I bought it against an excursion to the Zambesi, which I have been thinking about for the last two years."

"The Zambesi," she repeated wonderingly; "is that in Italy?"

"No, Signorina. It is on the Dark Continent."

She had never heard of the Dark Continent, but she only shrugged her shoulders, incuriously, and leant further across the table to examine a black pearl pin, shaped something like a death's head, which Vansittart wore in his tie, and thus brought her smiling lips very near his face.

While she leant thus, with the tip of her finger touching the pearl, and her eyes lifted interrogatively, a heavy hand was laid upon Vansittart's shoulder, and he was half twisted out of his chair—tilted after the manner of chairs on which young men sit—by sheer brute force on the part of the owner of the hand.

"Come out of that," said a voice that was thickened by drink.

Vansittart was on his feet in an instant, facing a man as tall as himself, and a good deal more bulky—a son of Anak, sandy-haired, pallid, save for red spots on his cheek-bones, spots that burnt like flame.

He was scowling savagely, breathless with rage. Lisa had risen as quickly as Vansittart, and Lisa's aunt had moved towards the newcomer in evident trouble of mind.

"Signor Giovanni," she faltered, "who would have thought to see you in Venice to-night?"

"Not you, evidently, you wicked old hag—nor you, hussy!" cried the man, furious and half stupid with drink. "I've caught you at your games, have I, you good-for-nothing slut! You couldn't stay indoors like a decent woman, but you must needs walk the streets late at night with this Cockney cad here."

"Take care what you say to her—or to me," said Vansittart, in that deep bass which means a dangerous kind of anger.

He put his arm round Fiordelisa, drawing her towards him as if she belonged to him and it

were his place to guard her from every assailant. The crowd made a ring about them, looking on, amused and interested, with no thought of interference which might spoil sport. The comedy some of them had seen at the Goldoni Theatre that night was not half so amusing as this bit out of the comedy of real life—the everlasting universal comedy of human passion.

“You infernal blackguard,” cried the stranger, trying to tear the girl from Vansittart’s protecting clasp; “I’ll teach you to carry on with my——”

A foul word finished the sentence: a blow from Vansittart, straight in the stranger’s teeth, punctuated it. Then came other foul words, and other blows; and the men were grappling each other like pugilists fighting for the belt. The unknown was of heavier build, and showed traces of former training, but Vansittart was in much better condition, and was nearer sobriety, though by no means sober. He had the best of it for some minutes, till the other man by sheer brute force flung him against the table, crashing down among the shattered glasses and coffee cups, and dealt him a savage blow below the belt, kicking him as he struck.

The table reeled over and Vansittart fell. Under his open hand as it struck the floor he felt the unsheathed dagger which Fiordelisa had flung down, in careless indifference, after deciding that it was too big for an ornament.

Infuriated by that foul blow, maddened by rage at the brutality of the attack, excited to fever heat by the surrounding circumstances, even by the very atmosphere, which reeked with tobacco and brandy, Vansittart sprang to his feet, clutched his foe by the collar, and plunged the dagger into his breast. In the moment of doing it the thing seemed natural, spontaneous, the inevitable outcome of the assault that had been made upon him. In the next moment, as those angry eyes grew dim, and the man fell like a log, Vansittart felt himself a coward and a murderer.

A sudden silence came upon the crowd, tumultuous a moment ago. A silence fell upon the scene, like a dull, grey veil, gauzy, impalpable, that had dropped from the ceiling.

"Dead," muttered a voice at Vansittart's elbow, as the man lay in the midst of them, motionless. "That knife went straight to the heart."

A shriek rent the air, wild and shrill, and the vibrating glasses answered with banshee echoings. Lisa flung herself upon the body, and tried to staunch the bubbling blood with her poor wisp of a handkerchief. A man pushed his way from the back of the crowd with an authoritative air—a doctor, doubtless; but before he reached the little clear space where the victim lay with Lisa crouching over him, and Lisa's aunt wringing her hands and ejaculating to the Madonna and all the Saints, a rough hand pulled Vansittart's arm, and a man whispered in Italian, "Run, run, while you have the chance."

"Run." Yes, he was a murderer, and his life belonged to the law, unless he used his heels to save his neck. Quick as lightning he took the hint, clove his way through the crowd, and made a dash for the door nearest the Piazzetta. The crowd were busy watching the doctor as he knelt beside that prostrate form—interested, too, in Fiordelisa, with her mask flung off, her loosened hair falling about her long white neck, her dark eyes streaming, her red lips convulsed and quivering. Vansittart was at the door, past it, before a man cried—

“Stop him ; stop the assassin.”

There was a sudden tumult, and twenty men were giving chase, a whole pack of human blood-hounds, perhaps as much for the sake of sport as from actual horror at the deed. They rushed along the Piazzetta, knocking down more than one astonished loungeur on their way. They made for the Pillars of St. Mark and St. Theodore—for that spot where of old the Republic put her felons to death, and where now the gondolas wait in sunshine and in starshine for the happy holiday wanderers in the dream-city.

He would make for the water naturally, and jump on board the first gondola he could find, thought his pursuers ; but when they reached the quay there was not a gondola to be seen. The gondoliers had all got their fares to-night, and all the gondolas were on the Grand Canal, with flaunting paper lanterns flying at their beaked prows, and coloured fires burning, and mandolines and guitars twanging, and “Funicoli, funicola,” echoing from boat to boat.

“We shall have him !” cried the foremost of that yelping pack, and even as he spoke they all heard the sound of a great splash, by the steps

yonder, and they knew their quarry had taken to the water.

The Venetians, warm with macaroni and wine, and in no humour for an improvised bath in those starlit waves, pulled up, and began to chatter; then whistled and shouted for gondolas, hopelessly, as to the empty air; and anon, by common consent, moved to the bridge hard by the furthest corner of the Doge's Palace, and from that vantage point looked over the water.

It was covered with holiday craft. Far as the eye could see the gaily decked boats were crossing and recrossing the broad reach between the Riva and the island church, and in the midst of them, like a sea-girt fortress, rose the dark hulk of the P. and O. steamer, her lights showing bright and high above those fantastical Chinese lanterns, her boilers throbbing, her cables groaning, all prepared for instant departure.

There was a deep-toned blast of the steamer's whistle, the clamour of the donkey engines suddenly ceased, and the beating of the screw lashed up the water: and, lo, all the gondolas were tossed and swung about like a handful of withered leaves on a running brook.

"She's off," cried one of Vansittart's pursuers, almost forgetting the chase in the pleasures of watching that big ship getting under way.

"Do you think he could have got on board her?" asked another; "he" meaning their quarry.

"Not he, unless he were a better swimmer than ever I knew."

He was a better swimmer than anybody among that Venetian's acquaintance—or, at any rate, he was good enough to swim out to the P. and O. steamer and to get himself on board her before the engines began to beat the water with their first deliberate pulsations. The last boat had left the side of the vessel; the sailors were drawing up the accommodation ladder, as he called to them with a voice of command which they did not question. In three or four minutes he was on deck, and had made his way, dripping as he was, to the captain of the vessel.

He explained himself briefly. He had got into a row—a Carnival frolic only—and wanted to get clear of Venice, and knowing the steamer was to sail for Alexandria that night, had swum out

to her at the last moment. He had plenty of money about him, and as for change of clothes, he must do the best he could.

"I hope it wasn't anything very bad," said the captain doubtfully, looking at this dripping stranger from top to toe.

"Oh no; a man hit me in a caffè just now, and I hit him."

The steamer was imperceptibly moving seaward at every steady throb of those ponderous engines, threading her way along the tortuous channel so slowly and cautiously at first that Vansittart wondered if she were ever going to get away. Venice the lamplit, the starlit, the beautiful, glided into the distance, with all her domes and pinnacles, her gondolas and Chinese lanterns, torches and skyrockets, music and laughter. Vansittart's heart ached as he watched the fairy city fading like a vision of the night. He had loved her so well—spent such happy, light, unthinking days upon those waters, in those labyrinthine streets, laughing and chaffing with the little merchants of the Rialto, following Venetian beauty through the mazy ways and over the innumerable bridges—happy, uncaring.

And now he was an escaped murderer, and would never dare to show his face in Venice again, "Good God!" he said to himself, in a stupor of horrified shame, "that I, a gentleman, should have used a knife—like an Australian miner, or a drunken sweep in Seven Dials!"

CHAPTER II.

AFTER-THOUGHTS.

THERE was nothing but fair weather for the P. and O. steamer *Berenice* between Venice and Alexandria—fair weather and a calm sea; and John Vansittart had ample leisure in which to think over what he had done, and to live again through all the sensations of his last night in Venice.

He had to live through it all again, and again, in those long slow days at sea, out of sight of land, with nothing between him and his own dark thoughts but that monotony of cloudless sky and ever-rolling waters. What did it matter to him whether the boat made eighteen or twenty knots an hour, whether progress were fast or slow? Each day meant an eternity of thought to him who sat apart in his canvas chair, staring

blankly eastward, or brooding with bent head, and melancholy eyes fixed on the deck, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, irritated and miserable when some officious fellow-passenger insisted upon plumping down by his side in another deck chair, and talking to him about the weather, or his destination, with foolish futile questionings as to whether this was his first voyage to the East, and all the idle inquisitiveness of the traveller who has nothing to do, and very little to think about.

Captain and steward had been very good to him. The former had asked him no questions after that first inquiry, content to know that he was a gentleman, and had a well-filled purse; the latter had put him to bed in the most comfortable of berths, and had given him a hot drink, and dried his clothes ready for the next morning. And in that one suit of clothes, with changes of linen borrowed from the captain, he made the voyage to Alexandria in the bright spring weather, under the vivid blue of the sky that canopies the Mediterranean. Perhaps the fact of living in that one suit of clothes all through those hot days intensified his sense of

being a pariah among the other passengers; he who had come among them with a hand red with murder.

Hour after hour he would sit in his corner of the deck, always the most secluded spot he could find, and brood over the thing that he had done.

He had an open book upon his knee for appearance's sake, and pretended to be absorbed in it whenever a curious saunterer passed his way. He smoked all day long for comfort's sake, the only comfort possible for his troubled brain, and all day long he thought of his last evening in Venice and the thing that he had done there.

To think that he, a gentleman by birth and education, should have slain a man in a tavern row; that he, who in his earliest boyhood had been taught to use his fists, and to defend himself after the manner of Englishmen, should have yielded to a tigerish impulse, and stabbed his unarmed foe to the heart! He, the well-bred Englishman, had behaved no better than a drunken Lascar.

He scorned—he hated—himself for that blind

fury which had made him grip the knife that accident had placed in his way.

He was not particularly sorry for the man he had killed; a drunken, violent brute, who for the sake of the rest of humanity was better underground than above it. A profligate who had seduced that lovely ignoramus under a promise of marriage, a promise which he had doubtless not the least intention to fulfil. He hated himself for the manner of the brute's death rather than for the death itself. If he had killed the man in fair fight he would have felt no regret at having made an end of him; but to have stabbed an unarmed man. There was the sting, there was the shame of it, there was the reproach, which cut into his heart like a whip of scorpions. All night long, between snatches of troubled sleep, he writhed and tossed in his berth, wishing that he were dead, wondering whether it were not the best thing he could do to throw himself overboard before daybreak and so make an end of these impotent regrets, this maddening reiteration of details, this perpetual representation of the hateful scene, for ever beginning and ending and beginning again in his tortured brain.

He would have decided upon suicide, perhaps, not having any strong religious convictions at this stage of his existence; but his life was not his own to fling away, however unpleasant he might have made it for himself.

He had a mother who adored him, and to whom he, for his part, was warmly attached. She was a widow, and he was the head of the house, sole master of the estate, and to him she looked for dignity and comfort. Were he to die the landed property would pass to his uncle, a dry old bachelor, and though his mother would still have her income, she would be banished from the house in which her wedded life had been spent, and she would be the loser in social status. He had an only sister, too, a fair, frivolous being, of whom, in a lesser degree, he was fond; a sister who had made her appearance in Society at the pre-Lenten Drawing-Room, and had been greatly admired, and who was warranted to make a good match.

Poor little Maud! What would become of Maud if he were to throw himself off a P. and O. steamer? Think of the scandal of it. And yet, if he lived, and that brutal business in the

Venetian caffè were to be brought home to him—murder, or manslaughter — it would be even worse for his sister. Society would look askance at a girl with such a cowardly ruffian for a brother—an Englishman who used the kuife against his fellow-man. Daggers and stilettoes might be common wear among Venetians; but the knife was not the less odious in the sight of an Englishman because he happened to be in a city where traditions of treachery and secret murder were interwoven with all her splendour and her beauty. It would be horrible, humiliating, disgraceful for his people if ever that story came to be known—a choice topic for the daily papers, with just that spice of romance and adventure which go to make a case worthy of exhaustive treatment.

Thinking over the question from the Society point of view—and in most of the great acts of life Society stands with the modern Christian in the place which the religious man gives his Creator — Vansittart told himself that every effort of his intelligence must be bent upon dissociating himself from that tragedy in the Venetian caffè. He had got clear of the city by

a wonderful bit of luck; for had the steamer started five minutes earlier, or a quarter of an hour later, escape that way would have been impossible.

He had heard the men giving chase on the Piazzetta as he jumped from the quay; heard them shouting when he was in the water. Had the steamer been stationary those men would have boarded her, and the whole story would have been known. She had weighed anchor in the nick of time for him. But what then? A telegram to the police at Brindisi or Alexandria might stop him, as other fugitive felons are caught every month in the year—men who get clear off at Liverpool, to be arrested before they step ashore at New York.

He paid his passage on the morning after his flight, and gave his name as John Smith, of London. The captain scrutinized him rather suspiciously on hearing that name of Smith; but Vansittart did not look like a swindler or a blackguard. He was under a cloud, perhaps, the captain thought, and Smith was most likely an assumed name; but anyhow he was a gentleman, and the captain meant to stand his friend.

"Are you going to stay long in Cairo?" he asked Vansittart, when they were within sight of Alexandria.

"Not long. Perhaps only till I get my luggage. I shall go up the Nile."

"You'll find it rather hot before you've been a long way."

"Oh, I don't mind heat. I'm not a feverish subject," said Vansittart, lightly, having no more idea of going up the Nile than of going to the moon.

"You'll stop at Sheppard's, of course?"

"Yes, decidedly. I'm told it's a very good hotel."

While they were nearing their port he contrived to get a good deal of information about the steamers that touched there. He meant to get off on the first boat that sailed after he landed. All the interval he wanted was the time to buy some ready-made clothes and a valise, so that he might not appear on board the homeward-bound steamer in the miserable condition in which he had introduced himself to the captain of the P. and O.

He parted with that officer with every expression of friendliness.

"I shan't forget how good you've been to a traveller in distress," he said lightly; "you may not hear of me for a month or two, perhaps. I may be up the Nile——"

"Take care of the climate," interjected the captain.

"But as soon as I go back to London I shall write to you. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Mr. Smith, and good luck to you for a fine swimmer wherever you go."

"Oh, I won a cup or two at Oxford," answered the other. "We rather prided ourselves on our swimming in my set."

He went to a restaurant where he could sit under an awning and read the latest papers that had found their way to Alexandria. There were plenty of Paris papers—*Galignani*, *Le Figaro*, *Le Temps*. There was a Turin paper, very stale—and there was a copy of the *Daily Telegraph* that had been left by some traveller, and which was a fortnight old. Nothing to fear there. Vansittart breathed more freely, and thought of going on to Cairo. But second thoughts warned him that Cairo was very English, and that he might meet some one he knew

there. Better to stick to his first plan, and go back to England by the first steamer that would take him.

He had to think of his possessions at Danieli's, and whether the things he had left there would provide a clue to his identity. He thought not. He had not given his name to hall porter or visitors' book.

The hotel was crowded, and he had—like a convict—been simply known as “150,” the number of his room.

Clothes, portmanteau, dressing-bag, bore only his initials, J. V. He had been travelling in lightest marching order; carrying no books save those which he picked up on his way, no writing materials, except the compact little case in his dressing-bag. It was his habit to destroy all letters as soon as he had read them—even his mother's, after a second or third reading. His card-case, note-case, and purse were all in his pockets when he made the plunge. No, he had left nothing at Danieli's; nor had he left Danieli's deep in debt, for he had paid his account on the morning before his flight, with a half-formed intention of starting for Verona by

the early train on Wednesday. He could resign himself to the loss of portmanteau and contents, and the plain pigskin bag, which had seen good service and had been scraped and battered upon many a platform.

Reflection told him that he had nothing to fear from the newspapers yet awhile, since no newspaper could have travelled faster than the steamer that had brought him, while the news of that homicide at Venice was hardly important enough to be telegraphed to any Egyptian journal. No, he was safe so far; but he told himself that the best thing he could do was to make good use of his time and get back to England and the wilderness of London; while the *Berenice* and her good-natured captain went on to Bombay, where, no doubt, the captain would read of that fatal brawl in the Venetian caffè, and identify his passenger as the Englishman who had stabbed another man to death.

Vansittart pulled himself together, counted his money, and rejoiced at finding that he had enough for his voyage home, and a trifle over for incidental expenses and a small outfit. The greater part of his money was in English bank-

notes, about which no questions would be asked.

He went to the steamboat office, and found that there was a P. and O. boat leaving that night for London, so he took his passage on board her, selected his berth, and then drove off to an outfitter's to get his kit, and a new cabin trunk, just big enough to hold his belongings. He bought a few French novels, and those small necessities of life without which the civilized man feels himself a savage.

His new ship sailed at midnight. He was on board her early in the evening, pacing the deck in the balmy night, and looking at the lighted town, the massive quays, which testify to English enterprise, the Pharos sending out its long lines of bright white light seaward—the gigantic break-water—all that makes the Egyptian port of to-day in some wise worthy of the Alexandria of old, when her twin obelisks stood out against the sky, and when her very name meant all that was grandest in the splendour of the antique world.

Vansittart looked at the starlit sky and lamp-lit city with a dull unobservant gaze, while the

weight and burden upon his mind deadened his sense of all things fair and strange, and made him indifferent to scenes which would once have aroused his keenest interest. How often he had dreamed his summer daydream of Egypt, lying on a velvet lawn in Hampshire, with a volume of old Herodotus, or some modern traveller, flung upon the grass beside him, in the idlesse of a July afternoon! How often he had promised himself a long winter in that historic land! He had not much of the explorer's ardour in those boyish days, no bent towards undiscovered watersheds and unpleasant encounters with blackamoors, no ambition to be reckoned amongst the mighty marksmen of the world, or to be called the father of lions; though in some vague visions he had fancied himself penetrating to that lone land where the Zambesi leaps headlong into the fathomless gorge, in blinding whiteness of foam and uproarious thunder of sound, a beauty and a terror to eye and ear. The things he most wanted to see were the things that his fellow-men had made, the palaces and statues, and fortresses and tombs that meant history. He was not a naturalist or a scientific traveller, had no

hope of making the world any richer by his discoveries, or of reading the smallest paper at the Geographical Society. He wanted to see men and cities, and all splendid memorials of past ages, for his own pleasure and amusement; and Egypt was one of the countries to which he had looked for delight, if ever satiety and weariness should overtake him amidst the nearer delights of his beloved Italy.

And, behold, to-day he had walked those Egyptian streets, and let those Egyptian faces pass by him, with eyes that seeing yet saw not, and with a mind that felt no interest in the things the eyes looked at. The distress in his thoughts, the perpetual labouring of his troubled mind, would not allow of pleasure in anything. That dull aching agony of remorse had taken hold of him, and left room for no other feeling. To the end of his life all that was picturesque and individual in this Egyptian seaport would be part and parcel of his self-humiliation, associated for ever with the thought that he had slain a fellow-creature, under circumstances for which he could find no excuse.

Again and again, as he paced the deck in the

starlight, the face of the man he had killed stood out against the deep azure of the sky and sea, as it had looked at him in that awful moment when one last ejaculation, "God!" broke from the parted lips, and the man fell as if struck by a thunderbolt. There was scarcely any change in his face as he fell—no ghastly pallor, no convulsion of the features. As he lay there looking up at the ceiling, one might hardly have thought him dead. No torrent of blood rushed from those parted lips. The stream ebbed slow and dull from the pierced heart. That savage thrust of the dagger had done its work well. How many daggers and what a gory butchery had been needed to make an end of Cæsar; and behold this man was done for with one movement of an angry hand. For John Vansittart murder had been made easy.

The homeward voyage seemed ever so much longer than the outward, and the gloom of his mind intensified as the summer days wore out; summer, for it was summer here on the Mediterranean, whatever season it might seem in London, summer at Genoa, summer all along the Riviera, where the mimosas flung their fairy

gold across the villa gardens, and the lateen sails shone dazzling white in the vivid sun, and the berceaus were beginning to clothe themselves with young vine leaves, unfolding out of crumpled woolly greyness into tender, translucent green.

He thought of Fiordelisa, and his thoughts of her were bitterest of all. He could not doubt that he had robbed her of her protector, the man whose purse provided for the little household of which she and her aunt had talked so gaily. It might be that he had left her to starve, or worse. Was it likely she would ever go back to Burano, and her lace-work, and her threepence-halfpenny a day, and her slipshod shoes, and her polenta, after having tasted the flesh-pots of Venice, the pallid asparagus and fat cauliflowers from the market in the Rialto, the savoury messes at the sign of the Black Hat? Would she go back and be a peasant again, after trapesing the Piazzetta in her flashy black and yellow gown, and sitting in a lantern-lit gondola, and twanging on her mandoline?

His experience of her sex and degree inclined him to think that she would not return to the old laborious life, with its hardships and priva-

tions. The first step upon the broad high-road of sin having been taken there would be but little scruple about the second; and those frank, bold, beautiful eyes, that swan throat and graceful form, would belong to somebody else. The good easy-going aunt would hardly stand in the way of a new settlement, when the last of their poor possessions had been carried to the Monte di Pietà, and hunger was at hand. Somebody else would pay the little old singing-master, and listen admiringly while Lisa sang to the wiry tinkling of her mandoline; and the lanterns would swing from the beak of the gondola in the festival evenings, and the rockets would shoot up through the purple night in front of Santa Maria della Salute, and all the palaces on the Grand Canal would shine rosy red, reflecting the Bengal fires, and Lisa would forget her murdered man, while those substantial feet of hers tripped gaily down the brimstone path.

If that tall, broad-shouldered, sandy-haired man had lived he might have kept his promise and married her. Who is to be sure that he would not? There are men in the world who will wed the girl they love, be she barmaid or

ballet-dancer; and that this man was fond of Fiordelisa there could be little doubt. His savage jealousy indicated the passionate force of the civilized savage's love.

Alas for Fiordelisa, widowed in the very morning of life! He who had wrecked her fortune could do nothing to help her. He dared not stretch out his hand towards her. His interest, for the sake of others as well as for his own sake, lay in severing every link that could connect him with the catastrophe of that fatal night. No, he could do nothing for Fiordelisa. He would not have grudged her the half of his income; and he dared not send her so much as a ten-pound note. She must sink or swim.

The thought of her ruin doubled the sum of his remorse.

He landed at Marseilles, and here, too, it was summer—summer at her brightest, with azure skies, and a sea deeper, bluer, more darkly glorious than the lapis lazuli in a jewelled châsse. The streets were full of traffic and abloom with flower-girls, noisily pressing their bunches of roses and pale Parma violets upon him as he walked up the Rue de la Cannebière

on his way from the quay to the railway hotel. There had been a time when the sights and sounds of that southern port were as strong wine to him, exhilarating, delighting him, when he could not have too much of the animation and picturesqueness of the place, the Corniche road, the wide-stretching bay with rocks and light-houses, the sea marks of every kind, and that glittering point where the waterways divide—to the left for Hindostan, China, Japan; to the right for the New World and the setting sun; two paths upon the trackless blue that seemed each to lead direct to fairyland.

And behold he had come from that Eastern land of glamour and mystery, from the tombs of the Pharaohs, from the ashes of Cleopatra, heart-weary, caring for nothing.

He went into one of the big caffès on his right hand, seated himself at a table in an obscure corner, and began to examine the papers, hastily turning them over one after another, worried by the sticks to which they were fastened. Yes, here it was, in the Paris *Figaro*.

“A fatal brawl occurred last Tuesday night in one of the caffès in the Piazza at Venice. Two

Englishmen fought savagely about a Venetian girl who had entered the caffè in the company of one of them. Both men appeared to have been drinking, and after a desperate encounter with fists, in the English fashion, the younger and better-looking of the two snatched up a dagger and stabbed his antagonist to the heart. Death was almost instantaneous. The murderer managed to get away in the confusion caused by the unexpected catastrophe, the crowded state of the Piazzetta and the Riva favouring his escape. It is supposed that he jumped into the water, and either managed to scramble into a gondola and get himself conveyed to the railway station or was drowned—though the latter supposition seems unlikely when it is considered that the canal was crowded with boats. Every effort to discover traces of the missing man has been made by the Venetian police, but as yet without success. The name of the murdered man was John Smith. He had been some time resident in Venice, but did not bear a good character in the city, where he was in debt to a good many of the smaller tradespeople in the Rialto. Very little seems to have been known about his sur-

roundings, even by the elderly woman who kept house for him, or the girl whose existence cost him his life."

John Smith. An assumed name, no doubt; just as false as that name of Smith which Vansittart had given to the captain and steward of the *Berenice*.

It did not seem to him, as he re-read this paragraph among the *Faits divers* in the *Figaro*, that the fatal event had created so much stir as he had supposed it would create. It seemed to him that he was getting off cheaply, and that he might go down to the grave without being called upon to answer for that deadly stroke. The man's isolation saved him. Had his victim been the member of a respectable English family, had there been father and mother, brothers and sisters to bewail his loss, much more stringent efforts might have been made to find his murderer. But a reprobate Englishman, a man who had perhaps severed every link that bound him to kindred and country, a scampish individual, living under an assumed name and unable to pay his way, was not the kind of person whose death in a tavern brawl was likely to make a great stir.

Had he disappeared, had there been the attraction of mystery about his doom, a riddle to solve, a crime unexplained and seemingly unexplainable, French and English newspapers might have given columns of florid writing to the case. But here there was no mystery, no dark enigma of love and murder. In the full glare of the gas, in sight of the crowd, these two men had fought, and one had proved himself unworthy of his British birthright by using a dagger against an unarmed antagonist.

Vansittart found the same paragraph repeated in several papers, and amongst his researches, aided by a waiter who brought him the accumulation of the last ten days, he found an old *Daily Telegraph* in which his crime formed the basis for a spirited leader, full of vivacity and local colour, written by a journalist who evidently knew Venice by heart. In this article the picturesqueness of the city, the riot of Carnival time, the historical associations of Doge and Republic, were more insisted upon than the brutality of the fight, or the unfair use of the dagger.

He felt a little easier in his mind after his

examination of the papers. It seemed to him that by the time he arrived at Charing Cross most people would have forgotten all about an event which was already three weeks old, and it would hardly occur to any one to connect him with the fatal brawl in the Piazza di San Marco.

He dined in the crowded, bustling restaurant in the Station Hotel with a little better appetite than he had felt for a long time, and took his seat in a corner of a compartment of the *Rapide*—not affecting the stuffy luxury of the “Sleeping”—for the long night journey to Paris, with a calmer mind than he had known since Shrove Tuesday. He looked out into the darkness when the train stopped at Avignon, and it was winter again, the bleak March winter before the Easter moon; and at Lyons the blasts from the two rivers blew colder still, and he felt that he was going home.

He was in Charles Street by afternoon tea-time, sitting in the cosy drawing-room with his mother and sister, being petted and made much of in a manner calculated to stimulate any young man’s self-love. His mother was a widow, and he was her only son, and he had been away from

her nearly half a year. His sister was seven years his junior, a pretty, frivolous young creature, whose mind rarely dwelt upon any more serious question than the fashion of her next ball-dress or how she should wear her hair, or the newest toy on her silver table. Yet she, too, adored Jack Vansittart in her pretty frivolous way, and had not yet begun to adore anybody else.

The room was full of flowers and old china, and little tables crowded with silver, and enamels, and Dresden boxes, and ivory paper-knives; and there were books in every available corner; an old room with panelled walls and a low ceiling, in a somewhat shabby old house which had belonged to Mrs. Vansittart's grandfather, an East India director, in the days when the Pagoda tree was still worth shaking. The furniture was seventy years old, a quaint mixture of old-fashioned English things, before the influence of Sheraton and Chippendale had died out, and Indian things, really and intensely Indian, before the days when Oriental goods began to be manufactured wholesale for English buyers. Bombay blackwood, with its clumsy curves enriched by elaborate carving, ivories, screens of black and

gold, rainbow-hued embroideries which time had scarcely faded, porcelain jars and enamelled vases, relieved the stern simplicity of rosewood and pale chintz. A few choice water-colours on the walls, and an abundance of flowers harmonized everything, and made Mrs. Vansittart's drawing-room a fitting nest for a very elegant woman and her very pretty daughter.

The London house was Mrs. Vansittart's own property; the house in Hampshire belonged to her son, and she spoke of herself and her daughter laughingly as caretakers.

"When you marry," said Maud, tossing up her pretty head, with pale gold hair frizzed in the prevailing fashion, "mother and I will have to budge. Whatever slut you may choose to fall in love with will be mistress of Merewood."

"Why must you needs suppose I may fall in love with a slut?"

"Oh, by the doctrine of opposites. You are one of those orderly, superior persons who are foredoomed to admire some wild girl of the woods, some harum-scarum minx, with fine eyes and half an inch of mud on the edge of her gown."

“However fine the eyes were, I think the half-inch of mud would be a warning that I could hardly ignore. But I do not claim to be either orderly or superior. My father’s Irish blood has infused a spice of disorder into my Anglo-Saxon character.”

And now on this bright April afternoon Jack Vansittart was being petted and fed by these two loving women, who could not do too much to prove their devotion to him after the long severance. They had only given him time just to wash his hands and brush the Kentish dust and chalk out of his hair and clothes before he sat down between them to a cup of tea. He had to assure them that he had lunched heartily at Calais, and wanted nothing but tea, or else a substantial meal would have been set out in the dining-room below.

“And you have come straight through from Marseilles?” said Mrs. Vansittart. “What a terrible journey!”

“Hot and dusty, mother; not very appalling to a traveller. But you are such a stay-at-home.”

“To my cost,” pouted Maud. “I haven’t the

least idea of what the world is like. I have to take other people's word that it is round."

"We found your telegram from Marseilles at two o'clock this morning when we came home from Mrs. Mountain's dance, and, rejoiced as I was to know you were coming back to us, I took it for granted you would loiter in Paris for a week," said Mrs. Vansittart.

"Paris is always delightful," replied her son; "but I was tired of wandering, and was honestly homesick. And here I am safe at home, and ever so much better off than poor old Odysseus. By the way, mother, your Italian spaniel did her level best to bite me as I came upstairs, and she and I were once such friends. Dogs have altered since the days of Argus."

"How silly of her! but she'll be devoted to you after a day or two. And now tell me, Jack, all you have been doing and seeing since you left Merewood last October. You are such a bad correspondent that one knows nothing about your wanderings, and if I were not well broken to your neglect I should be miserable about you."

"See how wise my system is," he said, laugh-

ing; "were I a good correspondent an interval of a week or so without a letter would scare you. I have heard of men who write regularly once a week to their people, or who keep a journal of their travels and send it home every fortnight for family perusal. But since you and Maud both know that I detest letter-writing, you expect nothing of me, and are never anxious."

"Indeed you are wrong, Jack," said his mother, with a sigh. "I have had many an anxious hour about you. But I'm not going to be doleful now I have you at home again, and for a long time, I hope."

"Yes, for a long time," echoed Jack. "I am sick of travelling."

There was a weariness in his tone that sounded as if he meant what he said.

"And now tell me your adventures."

The word hurt him like the sharp edge of a knife.

"I have had none. No one has adventures nowadays," he said. "I had a fortnight on an American friend's yacht in the Mediterranean, and we had some rather dirty weather, but nothing to hurt. That's my nearest approach to

an adventure. I had a month at Monte Carlo, shot a good many pigeons, and missed nearly as many as I shot; played a little, with varying luck, but am not ruined; came off on the whole a winner, though to no substantial amount, perhaps enough to buy a pair of solitaires for Maud's pretty little ears"—pinching the ear that was nearest him, as the girl sat on a low chair at his side. "No, I have had no adventures. I have only been in familiar places. Let me see, from where did I write last?"

"From Bologna, ages ago; a shabby little letter," answered Maud.

"Ah, I spent a few days in Bologna after I left Florence. I am rather fond of Bologna."

"And after that? Where did you go after Bologna? It must be nearly two months since you were there."

"Oh, I went to Padua and—and Verona," he answered carelessly, "and then back to Genoa, and then I dawdled along the Riviera, stopping a night or two here and there, to Marseilles; and here I am. That is my history—and I am ready for another cup of tea."

Maud filled his cup, and offered him dainty

biscuits and tempting cakes, and hung about him fondly, touching the thick hair which made such a waving line across the broad forehead.

“Why, how tremendously sunburnt you are!” she exclaimed. “You look as if you had just come off a sea voyage.”

“Do I? Well, I have basked in the sun that shines upon the Mediterranean; and a March sun on the Riviera is sometimes a blazer.”

“And you were at Bologna and Padua, and did not go to your beloved Venice?” said his mother. “I thought you were so fond of Venice?”

“Yes, I delight in the place, but I wanted to go back to the Riviera, where I should be more secure of sunshine and balmy air.”

“And you left Italy without revisiting Venice?” exclaimed Maud, who had often listened to his raptures about the City by the Sea.

There was no more to be said. For the first time in his life he had deliberately lied, and to his mother and sister, of all people—to those who in all the world most trusted and believed in him. He hated himself for what he had done; and yet he meant to maintain that false assertion

doggedly. He had not been to Venice. Let no casual acquaintance come forward to allege that he had been seen there. In the very teeth of assertion he would declare that in this spring-time of 1886 he had not been in Venice. He rejoiced in the thought that he had told his name to no one at Danieli's, and that he had entered the hotel as a stranger, having stopped at one of the hotels on the Grand Canal on his previous visits. He told himself that no one could convict him of having been in the fatal city last Shrove Tuesday—no one who knew him as Jack Vansittart.

“And now that you've had the history of my travels——”

“A sorry history, forsooth!” cried Maud. “You men have no capacity for description. When Lucy Calder came home from her Italian honeymoon she talked to me for hours about the places and things she had seen there.”

“Pretty prattler! Would you like me to recite a few pages of Murray or Joannes? All travelling is alike nowadays, Maud, and pleasure and comfort are only a question of good railway service and well-found hotels. We have done

with romance and adventure. Life is pretty much the same all over Europe. And now tell me what you have been doing; there is more interest in a girl's life in her first season than in all the cities of Europe."

"Well, Jack," Maud began, folding her hands and looking demure, "to begin with, I was presented at the February Drawing-Room. I went out with mother a goodish bit last November, don't you know, but I was not actually out. That only began after the Drawing-Room."

"And had you a pretty frock, and did the Royalties look kindly at you when you made your curtsy?"

"The Royalties might all have been waxwork, from Her Majesty downwards, for anything I knew to the contrary," said Maud. "I saw no faces—only a cloud of feathers, and a splendour of jewels, and velvet, and satin, all vague and troubled, like the figures in a dream—but I got through the business somehow, and mother said I made no mistakes."

"And the frock?"

"Oh, the frock was just as pretty as a frock can be. It was mother's taste. She talked out

every detail with Mdlle. Marie. She was not content to hear that Lady Lucille Plantagenet had worn this sort of thing, or Lady Gwendoline Tudor that sort of thing. She insisted on having just the frock she thought would suit me, Maud Vansittart. The train and petticoat were white satin—the satin you see in old pictures, satin in which there are masses of deep, steel-grey shadow and floods of white, silvery light—and then there was a cloud of aerophane arranged as only Marie can arrange a drapery, and in the cloud there were clusters of lilies of the valley and fluffy ostrich tips. The papers—the lady-papers mostly—went into raptures about my frock.”

“And did the lady-papers say nothing of the wearer?”

“Oh, some of them were so good as to say I was not quite the worst *débutante* of the year, and that they liked the way I had my hair dressed—and now I find our French hair-dresser has the impertinence to advertise the style as the Vansittart Coiffure.”

“What a frightful outrage! And having been presented, and being now actually out, I conclude

you have found London a very pleasant place, under mother's wing?" said Jack.

"Oh, it is all very quiet so far, and will be till after Easter, no doubt; but we have been to a few friendly dinners and a good many luncheons, and we have a cloud of invitations and engagements for May, and some of our Hampshire friends are in town, so there is plenty to do."

"And among your Sussex friends have you seen anything of your Yorkshire friend, Sir Hubert Hartley?" asked Jack.

"Yes. Sir Hubert is in town."

"And did he see you in your *débutante's* finery?"

"Yes, mother had a tea-party that afternoon, and there were a good many people—and, yes, Sir Hubert was there."

"And didn't that finish him?"

"Finish him! oh, Jack, what a horrid expression. I don't understand you in the least!"

"Of course not. Well, I'll say no more about my old friend Hubert. I can look him up at the Devonshire to-morrow."

"The Devonshire," sighed Maud. "How sad to think that he is one of the few respectable

people who can find it in their hearts to be Liberals."

"Yes, he is on the wrong side, no doubt, but that doesn't matter to us," said Jack.

Mrs. Vansittart sighed slightly as she touched her daughter's fluffy hair, the girl sitting on her low chair between mother and brother.

"My Maud would like her friends to be of the same opinion as herself," she said, "and she is such an ardent Conservative, and knows so much about politics."

"At least, I know that I am not a Radical, and that I hate what people call Progress," protested Maud. "Progress means pulling down every historical house and widening every picturesque street, cutting railways through Arcadian valleys, and turning romantic lakes into reservoirs."

"And progress sometimes means feeding the hungry, and teaching the ignorant," said her mother, "and building healthy dwellings for people who are herding in poisonous slums. I think we are all agreed as to the necessity for reform, Maud, whether we are Whigs or Tories."

"Oh, of course I want people to be taken care

of all over the world," replied Maud, "and I am prouder of our sound, roomy cottages than anything on our estate."

"Ah, that's the mother's work," said Vansittart. "One can see that a woman's eye watches over the parish."

"Sir Hubert tells me they have very good cottages at Hartley," pursued Maud, "but I cannot imagine either comfort or picturesqueness within twenty miles of Sheffield."

"Yet there are some romantic spots and some fine, bold scenery in that part of the world, I believe," said her brother.

Later in the evening mother and son were alone together in the room which had always been John Vansittart's sanctum and tabagie, a snug little room on the ground floor; and here the conversation was more serious than it had been at teatime, for wherever Maud was frivolity reigned. She had not yet discovered that life is a troublesome business. For her life meant new frocks and new admirers.

"Dear Jack," sighed the mother, looking fondly at the young man's sunburnt face, as he

sat silently enjoying his pipe, "I hope now we have you home again you are going really to settle down."

"Really to settle down," he repeated; "that sounds rather alarming. Settle down to what, mother? Not to matrimony, I hope!"

"To that in good time, dear; but at your own good time, not mine. That is a crisis I would be the last to hasten—not because I am afraid of being turned out of the big house at Merewood; this house will be more than enough for me—but because a hasty union is seldom a happy union."

"Ah, that's the old-fashioned way of looking at it. I believe in the love of a day, the happiness of a lifetime. I believe in elective affinities, and that in this over-populated world there is somewhere just the one woman who could make me happy. Don't be frightened, mother, the chances are against my meeting her; but till I do, till my heart goes tick-tack at the sight of her face, at the first sound of her voice, I shall not marry. I shall not marry because the wisdom of my elders says that it is good for a man to marry. I shall not marry just to place a hand-

some woman at the head of my table. I will be content with a round table, where there need be no headship."

"I was not thinking of marriage, Jack. I only want to see you settle down to the real business of life. I should be sorry to see you always an idler—sauntering through a London season, yachting a little in the Cowes week, shooting a little in September, hunting a little in October, and running away from the winter to amuse yourself at Nice or Monte Carlo. With your means and your independence you ought to do something better with your life and talents."

"My talents are an unknown quantity. I doubt if any one in this world, except my fond mother, gives me credit for being even moderately clever."

"I remember what you were as a boy, Jack, and how well you got on at Balliol."

"Oh, that was in the atmosphere, I think. I was in love with Greek because I worshipped Jowett. That was a boyish dream. All scholarly ambition is a thing of the past. I shall never do anything in that line."

"Perhaps not. You have too much energy

and activity for a student's life. I should like to see you a power in the House."

"Dearest flatterer, you would like to see me Prime Minister. I have no doubt you think that it simply rests with myself to become First Lord of the Treasury at an earlier age than William Pitt."

"No, no, Jack, I am not a foolish mother, fondly as I love you. But I know that you have good gifts, and I want the world to profit by them. I should like to see you in Parliament. There is so much to be done by good men in the shaping of our new England—the England of enlightenment and humanity—and I want to see my son's hand at the plough."

"The field to be ploughed is wide enough, I grant; but I don't know that my hand would be strong enough to drive a furrow."

"You could help, Jack; every good man can help."

"Mother, I believe you are at heart a Radical."

"I don't think one need be a Radical to wish that the masses were better off and more thought of than they are. No, Jack, it is because I am not a Radical that I want to see you in Parlia-

ment. You are rich, well-born, well-educated, and a staunch Conservative. You could fill a place that might be filled by some Radical adventurer who would look to Parliamentary life as a means of pushing his own fortune."

"If I can find any constituency willing to elect Conservative me instead of that Radical adventurer—who would in all probability be a much better speaker than I am, and appeal to a larger electorate—well and good. I have no great aversion to Parliament, but oh, you artful woman, I know why you would have me write M.P. after my name. 'If I can pen him up with the other sheep in the House of Commons he can go no more a-roving.' That is what you say to yourself, mother mine."

"No, no, Jack. I sadly want you at home, but I am not a hypocrite. Most of all I want to see you with higher aims than those of a mere pleasure-seeker. I want to be proud of my son."

She drew her chair nearer his and took his strong, broad hand in her slender clasp. In her eyes he was all that youth and manhood should be. She was proud of him already, though he had done nothing for fame. She was proud of

his height and strength, proud of his good looks, courage, good temper, of all those qualities which go to make an English gentleman.

“Proud of me,” he echoed. “Poor mother!” He drew his hand away, remembering that it was stained with the blood of his fellow-man.

CHAPTER III.

“ FAIRIES ! ”

NEARLY three years had gone by since that fatal night in Venice. It was mid-winter, only a few days after Christmas, and Mrs. Vansittart and her son were spending their Christmas holidays within twenty miles of Merewood.

Maud Vansittart had become Maud Hartley, but before bestowing herself upon her adoring lover she had insisted that he should buy a place within reasonable distance of the house in which she had been born and reared, the home in which she could so vividly recall the image of a beloved father, and where all her happy years of girlhood had been spent with the mother she fondly loved. Sir Hubert had a fine place in the wild Yorkshire hills, half an hour's journey from Sheffield, a solid red-brick manor house in

the Georgian style, built by his great-grandfather; but to that house as a home Maud would not consent to go. Her lover being rich enough to buy a second country seat as easily as some men buy a second horse, there had only remained the trouble of choosing a home that Maud could approve.

A house was found, neither too old nor too new, upon the side of Blackdown, in that rich and picturesque country between Petworth and Haslemere—Redwold Towers, a roomy, well-built mansion, with just land enough to satisfy Hubert Hartley’s idea of a home-farm, without diverting his capital from that wider domain of Hartley Manor, where he had fields and pastures of a hundred acres each, and where he grew prize oxen and cart-horses worth their weight in gold, as it seemed to Maud, when she heard of six or seven hundred pounds being given for one of these creatures.

Merewood, John Vansittart’s patrimonial estate, was near Liss, in Hampshire, a long, low, capacious house, on a ridge of pineclad hill, and fronting a wild valley, which grew very little of a profitable nature for man or beast, but where

the perfume of the pine woods and the gold and purple of gorse and heather were worth all that the fattest soils can produce. Fertile pastures and spacious cornfields were not wanting to the estate, but those lay behind the crest of the hill.

Maud had been married nearly two years, and there was a short-coated baby in the nursery at Redwold, albeit Sir Hubert would rather the eyes of his firstborn had opened upon the light that shone into the old family bed-chamber at Hartley Manor, the patriarchal bed-chamber with its patriarchal bed, birth chamber and death chamber, room in which the good old great-grandsire's eyes had closed peacefully, verily "falling on sleep," after a life of ninety years, and after having enriched the world with many useful inventions, and established a wealthy progeny. Unhappily, Maud hated Hartley Manor House, and only went there for a month in the shooting season as a concession to the best of husbands.

"Of course, I always meant to marry him," she told her brother, "and he is the only man for whom I ever cared a straw; but I wanted to

have my fling in London; and I liked being talked about as the pretty Miss Vansittart. I was, you know, Jack. You needn't laugh at me. And I liked making other young men miserable, by leading them on a little, meaning nothing all the time.”

“Had you many victims? Were there any suicides?”

“Don't talk nonsense. You know how little young men really care nowadays. There were some of them who would have liked to marry me, had everything been made easy, settlements, and all that. And,” with sudden solemnity, “I might have had a coronet if I had made the most of my chances.”

“A hard-up coronet, do you mean? A coronet that wanted re-gilding.”

“No, sir. All those go to America. My coronet was rich and altogether desirable—but it was not to be,” with a faint sigh. “I could not throw Hubert over. He was so ridiculously fond of me.”

“Was? Is, I hope,” said Jack, this retrospective survey of a girl's career being made one afternoon in the snowy Christmas week, as Jack

and his sister tramped home with the shooters, after a day on the hills.

"Yes, he still adores me, poor fellow, though he has found me out ever so long ago."

"Found you out—how?"

"Oh, he has found that I am frivolous and selfish, and utterly worthless, from the moralist's point of view. He has found out that although I am fond of pretty cottages and cottage gardens, I don't care much about the cottagers, and that I never know what to say to them. He has found out that I haven't the interests of the poor really at heart. In short, he has found that I am a thorough-bred Tory instead of a hot-headed Radical, as he is. I'm afraid we ought never to have married. It is like trying to join fire and water."

"Oh, but I think you manage to get on capitally together, in spite of any difference in your political opinions. Indeed, I did not think you knew much about politics."

"I don't. I know hardly anything. I never read the debates, and my mind always wanders when people are talking politics; but my Conservatism and Hubert's Radicalism enter into

everything—into our way with servants, into our treatment of our friends, into our ideas about dress, manners, church. I cannot even shake hands with a cottager as he does. I have tried to imitate him, but I can't achieve that unconscious air of perfect equality which comes so natural to him. And do what I will I can't help feeling ashamed of that great-grandfather of his who began life in Sheffield as a poor lad, and who invented something—some quite small thing, it seems to me—and so laid the foundations of the Hartley wealth. That is a little bit of family history which I should so like everybody to forget, while poor Hubert is quite proud of it. At Hartley Manor he will insist upon showing people the great-grandfather's portrait in his working clothes—just as he looked when he invented the thing, whatever it was.”

“You would not have him ashamed of the founder of his fortune. I have heard of a house in which the portrait of the good man who made the family wealth has a looking-glass in front of it, so that the will which ordained that that portrait should hang on one particular panel in the dining-room as long as the family mansion

stood may be kept to the letter, while it is broken in the spirit. But this was a particularly irksome case, for the good man had made his money out of tallow, and had been painted with a pound of mould candles in each hand. Think of that, Maud ! Fustian and corduroy are paintable enough ; but not even Herkomer could make anything out of two bunches of tallow candles."

"I wish Hubert would let me hang a fine Venetian glass in front of his worthy great-grandfather. However, since he himself is a gentleman, I suppose I ought to be satisfied," said Maud ; "I don't believe there is a finer gentleman in England than my husband, Radical as he is."

Vansittart's sister was perfectly happy in her married life. She had a husband who petted and indulged her, with inexhaustible good humour, and who thought her the most enchanting of women, with infinite capacities for soaring to a higher level than she had yet attained. She had as much money as ever she cared to spend, and a house in which she was allowed to do what she liked, so long as she did not trample

on the rights and privileges of the old servants from Hartley Manor, who had been dominant there since Hubert's infancy; servants whose proud boast it was to have been associated with every circumstance of their master's life, from the cutting of his first tooth to the bringing home of his bride. It is strange what Conservative ways these Radicals sometimes have in the bosoms of their families.

Sir Hubert Hartley was not like David, ruddy and fair to see. He was a small, dark man, who looked as if some of the original Sheffield smoke, the smoke inhaled by the inventor day after day for half a century, had given its hue to his complexion. He was wiry, and well built, for a small man, active, energetic, a good shot, a good horseman, a lover of all field sports and wild animals, loving, after the sportsman's fashion, even the creatures he destroyed, curious about their habits, keen in his admiration of their strength and beauty. For the rest, he was a man of widest beneficence, charitable, hospitable, house-proud in the best sense of the word, and he was a man whom the better-born Jack Vansittart loved and honoured.

They were about the same age, and had been

at Eton and Oxford together, and Jack knew his friend by heart. He could have chosen no better husband for his sister; he could have chosen no man he would have preferred to call his brother-in-law. It seemed to him sometimes that he could have hardly liked a brother better than he liked Hubert Hartley.

Jack Vansittart was still a gentleman at leisure. He had coquetted with politics, and had allowed himself to be spoken of as a young man who might be an acquisition to the Conservative party, but he had not allowed himself to be nominated for any constituency. "The party is strong enough to get on without me," he said; "I'll wait till the General Election, and then I'll go in for all I know, and try to gain them a seat in the teeth of the enemy. I should like to try my luck in Yorkshire, and win an election against Hubert and all his merry men. I might stand for Burtborough—attack Hartley in his own stronghold."

Burtborough was the small market town that supplied the necessities of Hartley Manor House. The Hartleys had represented Burtborough for two generations, but Hubert had withdrawn from

the political arena, disgusted at the turn of events, and finding more pleasure in turnips and prize cattle than in the art of legislation. He had never been brilliant either as an orator or debater, and he thought he had done his duty by country and party when he had secured the election of a conscientious Liberal for Burtborough. Marriage had helped to make him lazy. He loved his home; stable and gardens; farm and woods; his pretty wife and cooing baby. John Vansittart thought him the most enviable among men.

"He has all the desires of his heart," thought Vansittart. "He has not an unsatisfied ambition. He has a clear conscience, can look his fellow-men straight in the face and say, 'I have injured no man:' as I cannot, God help me: as I never can so long as I live. At every turn of the road I expect to meet some one whom I have injured—a mother who may have loved that man as my mother loves me—a sister whose life has been made desolate by his death, reprobate though he was. No man stands alone in the world. Whoever he may be, when he falls, he will drag down some one."

And then he thought of Fiordelisa, with her sunny Italian eyes, and her light-hearted acceptance of such good things as Fate threw in her way—the lodgings on the Rialto, the mandoline lessons, the fine dress and good food. She had taken these things as if they were manna from heaven; and assuredly no rigid principle, no adherence to her Church Catechism, would restrain her from seeking manna from new sources. What had she become, he wondered, in the years that had made his crime an old memory? An artist's model, or something worse? In these days of photography that beautiful face of hers would have less value than in the golden age of Tintoret and Veronese.

He had done his best to forget that scene at Florian's; but the image of Fiordelisa returned to his memory very often, harden himself as he might against the pangs of remorse, and the thought of her always saddened him. He had the same kind of sorrow for having spoiled her life as he might have felt had he been cruel to a child. Her ignorance, her friendlessness appealed so strongly to his pity—and even the old aunt, who so placidly accepted the situation, did

not appear to him as odious as a hard-headed Englishwoman would have appeared under the same conditions.

Nearly three years had passed, and he knew no more about the man he stabbed than he had known when the dagger dropped from his hand warm with the stranger's life-blood. The most watchful attention to the newspapers had resulted in no further knowledge. There had been an occasional paragraph about the fatal brawl in Venice. He was thankful to observe that no one had written of his crime as murder. The fact that the dagger had been bought within an hour of its fatal use—the sudden and accidental nature of the encounter—and the brutality of the unknown's attack had been discussed at length, and there had been a good deal of speculation as to his own character and social status. Had the event happened a few years later some keen-witted special correspondent would doubtless have contrived to interview Fiordelisa; and the girl's artless prattle, her Venetian lodgings, and her mandoline would have furnished material for a spirited article.

The interest in the death of a nameless Eng-

lishman soon died out, and the newspapers found no more to say about the fatal brawl in the Piazza, and as the years went by Vansittart told himself that this dark chapter in his life was closed for ever, that the mother who loved him would never know that his conscience was burdened with the death of a fellow-creature, or that her son, in a moment of anger, had behaved as savagely as the commonest ruffian.

Looking backward he remembered an occasion in his boyhood when a sudden impulse of fury had brought disgrace upon him, and had caused his mother much distress of mind. It was at a time when he was reading hard at home with a private tutor, shortly before he went to Oxford. A groom had ill-used one of his horses, or Vansittart believed he had, and the young man had attacked and belaboured him severely. The lad had been able to defend himself, and the two had been fairly matched as to weight and size, but Vansittart had all the science on his side, and he felt afterwards that he had disgraced himself by the encounter. His mother's distress grieved him deeply; and he went so far as to apologize to the vanquished hireling, which

apology raised him to the pinnacle of honour in the opinion of the stable generally.

"There's plenty of young masters as would chuck a sovereign to a lad he'd whacked, but it's only a thoroughbred one that would say, 'I beg your pardon, Bates; I ought to have known better,'" said the old family coachman, who had driven Master Jack to be christened.

The burden upon his conscience was an old burden by this time, and he was able to carry his load so that no one suspected evil under that pleasant, open-hearted aspect of a man who fulfilled all the social duties. He was a good son, a kind and affectionate brother, a generous landlord and master. As the world saw his life there was no flaw in it. He had troops of friends, an honourable status, plenty of money, everything that this world can give of good, in that moderate measure which the poet-philosopher has taught us to esteem as life's best.

"I suppose the sword is hanging by a hair somewhere, and will drop when I least expect it," he said to himself, in the hour of dark memories.

A chance allusion—some loving word of praise

from his mother, the turn of a conversation, the plot of a play or a novel—would sometimes stir the dark waters of memory; but he did his best to forget, since there was nothing that he could do to atone; and he tried to convince himself that it was all the better for humanity at large that there was one reprobate less in the world.

This had been his temper for the last year or so, as memory lost something of its vivid colouring; and he had come to take that act of his in Venice as part and parcel of his life and character.

He bore himself gaily enough in this Christmas holiday at Redwold Towers, and Lady Hartley declared that he was the life and soul of her house-party.

“You have not such a passion for field-sports as the rest of the men,” she said. “One may hope to be favoured with your society for an occasional hour between breakfast and dinner, while those other wretches troop off in their horrid thick boots before I come downstairs in the morning, and I hear no more of them till dinner, unless I go with the luncheon cart.”

"I'm afraid my superiority must be put down to advancing years and growing laziness. I never was so good a shot as Hubert, and I have never been as keen a sportsman."

"Perhaps that is because you have spent so much of your holiday life on the Continent. Hubert would be miserable if he were asked to spend a winter out of the British Isles, unless he were pig-sticking in India, or fishing in Canada, or hunting lions in Africa. He cannot get on without killing things. You are not like that. You have no thirst for blood."

"No," answered Jack, with a laugh; "I am not great at killing things, though I am just English enough to think poorly of the straightest run if it doesn't end in blood."

"Oh, of course, I know you can ride, and that you have a proper English love of hunting and shooting, but you don't give your life up to sport and farming as Hubert does. You have only to look at his boots, and you can understand his life. Such an array of bluchers, tops, brogues, waterproof fishing boots and dreadful hob-nailed, broad-toed things, that look like instruments of torture—as if they had been

modelled upon the boot that one reads of under the Plantagenets and Tudors. People talk of writing as an index of character. I would rather see a man's boots than his penmanship if I wanted to know what kind of man he was."

"And you put me down as a single-soled, effeminate person?" said Jack; whereat there was a laugh from the house-party, sitting cosily round the morning-room fire, with the exception of one industrious matron who sat by the window, toiling at an early English counterpane which required to be worked upon a frame.

"No, no. I don't consider you womanish. You would never sink into the useful family friend, or the tame cat, even if you were to remain a bachelor all your life. But your boots are more human than Hubert's; and you are fond of art, and books, and music, for which I fear he cares very little."

"He cares for something much better," said Vansittart. "He cares for humanity, and is always thinking how he can improve the condition of the people who are dependent upon him. His cottages at Hartley are models of all that cottages should be, and there is not a good

point about them that he has not thought out for himself.”

“Yes, he is always his own architect, and he has really some very good notions, though he is not as picturesque as I should like him to be in his ideas. The cottages about here may not be as commodious as ours in Yorkshire, but they are ever so much prettier—dear old cottages, more than half roof, and with the quaintest casements.”

“And very little light or air inside, I dare say ; capital cottages for the landscape, but not so agreeable to live in as to look at.”

The party in the morning-room consisted of the three Miss Champernownes, daughters of a Cornish baronet, all handsome, stylish, accomplished, everything in short that Mrs. Vansittart would have approved in a daughter-in-law ; Mrs. Baddington, the lady of the counterpane, who was so completely absorbed in her art needlework that she might as well have stopped at home and worked by her own fireside ; but as her husband, Major Baddington, was a good shot and a pleasant companion, the lady’s inoffensive dulness was tolerated in country houses.

The other ladies present were Mrs. Vansittart and a Miss Green, a young lady who gave herself airs on the strength of her people being *the* Greens—the Greens of Peddlington, in whose particular case the name of Green was supposed to rank with Guelph or Ghibelline. Miss Green was plain, but clever, and was as boastful of her plainness as of her good old name. Her people were rich, and she had inherited an independent fortune from a bachelor uncle, who had bequeathed his wealth to her with an embargo against marriage with any man—less than a Peer—who should refuse to assume the name of Green. And even in the case of her marriage with a Peer, it was ordained that her second son, should one be forthcoming, should be called Green—by letters patent—and should inherit the Green wealth, strictly tied up in the case of the heiress.

Miss Green was economical to meanness—perhaps with some dim idea of enriching that hypothetical scion of nobility—and was proud of her economy. Her chief delight in the metropolis was to go long distances—generally in an omnibus—in quest of cheapness; and she

was a scourge to all the young matrons of her acquaintance by her keen interest in their house-keeping, her knowledge of prices, and her outspoken condemnation of their extravagance. She had one original idea which had achieved a kind of distinction for her from the housekeeping point of view, and that was her non-belief in the Co-operative Stores.

Such was the feminine portion of the house-party at Redwold Towers, and it was to this party that John Vansittart had succeeded in making himself eminently agreeable. He had admired the artistic shading and Tudoresque scroll-work of Mrs. Baddington's counterpane, and had surprised that lady by what seemed a profound knowledge of early Florentine needle-work. He had tramped Blackdown in the wind and the weather with the Miss Champernownes, turn and turn about, and was no nearer falling in love with any of the three than when he began these rambles; he had discussed the art of dressing well upon fifty pounds a year with Miss Green, and had allowed her to convince him that the Greens of Peddlington were an older family than the Plantagenets; and to-day

he had given himself up to idleness in the gynæceum, or morning-room, and had offered himself for two round dances apiece to the four young ladies, at the hunt ball in the little rustic town, to which they were all going that evening.

"It will be an awful drive," said Maud Hartley; "think what the hills will be like in this weather."

There had been an "old-fashioned Christmas," and the world outside the morning-room windows was for the most part a white world.

"The horses have been roughed, and your coachman tells me he has no fear of the hills," said Vansittart. "He is going to take four horses."

"I'm sure they'll be wanted, poor things, with that big omnibus and a herd of us to drag up those terrible hills," said his sister.

"If you have any feeling for the brute creation you can get out and walk up the hills," said Jack.

"What, in our satin slippers? How very delightful!"

There was no one heroic enough to propose walking up the hills at ten o'clock that evening,

when the omnibus from Redwold went bowling merrily over the frost-bound roads, uphill and downhill, at a splendid even pace, and with a rhythmical jingle of bars and chains, as the four upstanding browns laid themselves out for their work, going as if it was a pleasure to go through the steel-blue night, with the quiet fields and pastures stretching round them, silvery in the moonshine, while in every dip and hollow the oak and chestnut copses lay in deepest shadow, darkly mysterious.

They skirted Bexley Hill, they passed by sleeping villages and wind-swept commons.

"Are we nearly there?" asked Hilda Champernowne.

"Hardly halfway," answered Lady Hartley. "I told you it was a long drive."

There was a bright lamp inside the omnibus, a lamp which lit up the three Miss Champernownes in a cloud of gauze and satin, white as the snow-drifts in the valleys, a lamp which shone on three heads of glittering gold-brown hair, and three pairs of fine eyes, and three cherry mouths, and three swan-like throats rising out of ostrich plumage. It shone on Maud Hartley's cloak of

scarlet and gold and blue-fox fur, and sparkled on the diamond solitaires in her ears, clear and white as dewdrops on a sunny morning.

They were a very merry party. Major Badlington and Sir Hubert were outside, wrapped to the ears in fur coats and caps, and enjoying their smoke in the frosty air. Jack and two other young men rode inside with the feminine contingent, who were glad of this leaven of masculine society, though they pretended to be in alarm at the crushing of their draperies.

"I feel a dark foreboding that all the dancing men will have engaged themselves for the evening before we arrive," said Claudia Champernowne.

"Not if they know the Miss Champernownes are going to be there," said Mr. Tivett, a young man with a small voice and a reputation for all the social talents.

"Who cares anything about us?" cried Claudia. "We are strangers in the land."

"I think that some of the dancing men will wait for my party," said Maud. "I am famous for taking pretty girls to our local dances."

They were steadily ascending the worst hill they had to climb; the omnibus was on an

inclined plane, and Hilda Champernowne in her place at the back of the vehicle looked down upon Jack Vansittart seated in a hollow by the door. They were near the top, when the brake was put on suddenly, and the horses were pulled up. A ripple of silvery laughter rang out upon the frosty air.

"Fairies!" cried Vansittart.

"Who can it be, and why are we stopping?" asked Miss Champernowne, "when we are so late, too!"

There were voices, two or three feminine voices, all talking at once, and then Hubert was heard answering. Anon more laughter. Sir Hubert and a groom got off the 'bus, and the former came to the door.

"Can you make room for three girls?" he asked.

"Not for a mouse," replied his wife. "We are hideously crushed already. I believe all our gowns are spoilt."

"Then a little more squeezing won't hurt," said Sir Hubert. "Look here, you three men can come outside. It'll be a tight pack, but we'll manage it, and the three ladies can have

your places. It's a lovely night. You're none of you bronchial, I hope."

"Only chronic, from my cradle," said Mr. Tivett, in a meek, little voice.

"Oh, Tivett can stay inside. He is the nearest approach I know to Euclid's definition of a line—length without breadth."

Jack Vansittart was out by this time, and Reggie Hudson, a soldierly young man, slipped out after him. The women drew themselves together discontentedly. Each would have had an omnibus to herself if she could.

"I haven't the faintest idea whom we are making room for," grumbled Maud.

"I know we shall be dreadfully late," sighed Claudia.

"I say, you good folks out there, hurry up, please," cried the gallant Tivett. "It's getting on for eleven, and this isn't a picnic-party."

He was talking to the empty air. A ripple of that elfin laughter from the top of the hill was all that answered him. Sir Hubert, Vansittart, and Major Baddington were all standing round a most melancholy specimen of the genus fly, the very oldest and mouldiest of one-horse

landaus, which had broken down hopelessly on the top of the hill.

“We knew that the springs were weak,” said a silver-clear voice out of a swansdown hood. “They’ve been getting weaker and weaker ever since we’ve had anything to do with the fly; but we had no idea the shafts were all wrong.”

“The shafts were right enough when we started, miss,” growled a voice that was half muffled in a red comforter, such a comforter as denotes the rustic fly-man. “It was your weight coming up the hill as did it.”

“My weight,” cried Swansdownhood, lifting herself up on her springy feet like a feminine Mercury. “Do I look such a Daniel Lambert?”

Her hood fell off with that arch toss of the head, and looking at her in the vivid moonlight it seemed to Jack Vansittart as if that jocular exclamation of his had been well founded, and that the woman who stood before him on the crest of the hill, her beauty and her whiteness shining out against the steel-blue sky—“like a finer light in light”—was enchanting enough to have stood for Titania.

She was very tall, but so slim and willowy of

form that her height made her no less sylph-like—a queen of sylphs, perhaps, but assuredly of the sylphide family. She was dazzlingly fair, and her small head was crowned with a nimbus of pale gold hair, in which there sparkled a galaxy of diamond starlets. Her small nose was tip-tilted, but with a tilt so archly delicate as to be more beautiful than the purest Grecian, or so Vansittart thought, seeing her thus for the first time in the glamour of night and moonshine, and with all the piquancy of the unexpected and unknown.

“The shafts went crash,” said another young person, who presented to view only a nose and narrow slip of face between the folds of a red plaid shawl, just such a shawl as a well-to-do farmer’s wife might have worn driving to market; “they went crash, and the horse fell down. I thought we should all be killed.”

“And so you would have been, if I hadn’t put the brake on sharp, and got down and sat on ’is ’ed,” said the fly-man. “That horse didn’t ought to have been sent out on such roads as this, and if I’d been master he wouldn’t have been.”

“ We won’t trouble you for your opinions, my friend,” said Sir Hubert, throwing a florin lightly into the man’s hand. “ You’d better take your beast home, and give yourself a hot drink. I’ll take care of Miss Marchant and her sisters.”

“ Oh, but really,” said Swansdownhood, “ it is immensely good of you—only they had better send a fly for us after the dance. We can’t encroach upon you for the home journey.”

“ Why not? Of course we shall take you home. Come along ; I’m afraid you’re catching cold while we’re talking.”

He marched the three girls—the spokeswoman and tallest all in white from top to toe, the second with a black lace frock showing below her Stuart shawl, the third muffled in a blue opera cloak and a blue crochet hood.

“ Here are the Miss Marchants, come to claim your hospitality,” said Sir Hubert to his wife ; whereupon Maud replied, graciously—

“ Oh, how do you do, you poor things? Pray come in. How cold you must be! Did your carriage break down? How dreadful! I’m afraid there’s not much heat left in our foot-warmers, but it is tolerably warm here still”—

the heat inside the 'bus was tropical—"and I hope you'll be able to make yourselves comfortable."

"Such a dreadful intrusion!"

"Such a frightful herd of us!"

"How you must all detest us!" cried three fresh young voices all at once.

The three Champernownes and the Green maintained a stolid silence. Those four pair of eyes were coldly appraising the intruders—their looks, their dress, their social status, everything about them.

The fair tall girl in the swansdown hood was very pretty. That fact the most unfriendly observer could not well deny. Whether that dazzling fairness was in some part artificial remained to be proved under a more searching light than the omnibus lamp; but even if that alabaster complexion were due to blanc de something the girl's eyes were real—lovely dancing blue-grey eyes, softened by dark brown lashes. Her nose was the prettiest thing in that unrecognized order of noses; mouth and chin were in perfect harmony; and she looked round at the strange faces with the sweetest smile, as if

she had never suffered from prejudice or undeserved disdain.

The other two girls were of the same type, but of inferior beauty. The blue girl was freckled and weather-beaten; the Stuart plaid girl was too pale. Titania had taken the lion's share of the family beauty.

But their dress—that at least afforded widest scope for the scorner. The swansdown hood was of the year one, or perhaps might have been fashionable in the historic winter of the Crimean war; the blue crochet headgear and tawdry blue opera cloak suggested all that is commonest in cheap finery; and what manner of surroundings could a girl have whose people allowed her to go to a hunt ball with her head and shoulders skewered in a tartan shawl with a blanket pin?

“ We are taking no chaperon,” said Titania, brightly. “ Mrs. Ponto is to chaperon us.”

Mrs. Ponto was the wife of a solicitor at Mandelford, the little town where the ball was being given. It was the first hunt ball there had been at Mandelford within the memory of Sussex, and the fact that this ball was taking place at Mandelford was due to the enterprise of

a local cabinet-maker, who had built a public hall or assembly room at the back of his shop, and had thus provided a place for festivity or culture; music, amateur theatricals, Oxford or Cambridge lectures, conjuring or Christy Minstrels.

After that little apologetic remark about the chaperon, there followed a silence, the Champernownes and Miss Green remaining figures of stone, and Maud Hartley feeling that she had done her duty as hostess. The carriage rolled merrily over the frost-bound road, and the hoofs of the four horses sounded like an advance of cavalry in the winter stillness. Perhaps the silence inside the omnibus would have lasted all the way to Mandelford had it not been for little Mr. Tivett, who sat between two Miss Champernownes, half enveloped in a cloud of snowy gauze and ostrich feathers, peeping out at the three pretty faces on the other side of the 'bus, with bright, inquisitive eyes, like a squirrel out of a mossy nest.

“I don't know what I have done to offend you, Lady Hartley, that you should not think me worthy to be introduced to these young ladies,” said the good little man at last.

“My dear Mr. Tivett, it was an oversight on my part. I forgot that you and the Miss Marchants had not met before. Of course, you are dying to know them.—Miss Marchant, allow me to introduce Mr. Tivett, a devoted admirer of your sex—a gentleman who knows more about a lady’s dress, and a lady’s accomplishments and amusements, than one woman in a hundred.”

“My dear Lady Hartley,” remonstrated Tivett, in his piping voice, “Miss Marchant will run away with the idea that I am a horrible effeminate little person.”

“She will very soon discover that you are the most obliging little person, and I dare say she will end by being as fond of you as I am.”

“Dearest Lady Hartley, how delightful of you to say that!” exclaimed Mr. Tivett, with a coquettish giggle, darting out his little suède glove to give his hostess an affectionate pat on the shoulder; “and now you have heard my character, Miss Marchant, please will you give me a dance?”

“With pleasure,” replied Eve, wondering whether she would look very ridiculous spinning round a public ball-room with this funny little

man, who was small enough to be almost hidden in the Champernowne draperies; "which shall it be?"

"Oh, the first waltz after our arrival, and I hope your sisters will each give me one of the extras."

"I shall be very glad," said the girl in the tartan shawl. "I don't suppose I shall have too many partners."

Mr. Tivett looked at the three faces critically. The eldest girl was much the prettiest, but there was a family likeness. The faces were all of one type, and they were all pretty. It smote Mr. Tivett's gentle heart to think these nice girls should be so badly dressed, while the Champernownes, who always snubbed him, and whom he hated, were glorious in frocks fresh from Bond Street. Lady Hartley had not exaggerated Mr. Tivett's devotion to the fair sex. He loved the society of young matrons and girls in their teens, was never happier than when making himself useful to the ladies of the family, and especially rejoiced when consulted upon any question of etiquette or costume. He was reputed to have faultless taste in dress, and an exquisite tact in

all social matters; and when two matrons of his acquaintance happened to quarrel, each was apt to impart the story of her wrongs to Mr. Tivett, whose only difficulty was to be the adviser of both, without seeming unfaithful to either. He was not a sportsman, and he pleaded a weak chest as a reason for loving easy-chairs, and cosy corners in boudoirs and morning-rooms, and a seat in a carriage when other men were walking. His Christian name was Augustus; but he was always known as Gus, or Gussie.

Having been introduced to the eldest sister, Mr. Tivett was on easy terms with the three girls in about five minutes, and for the rest of the journey the four were prattling gaily, Lady Hartley chiming in now and then, just for civility's sake, while the other women maintained their unfriendly silence.

“I knew we should be late,” Claudia Champernowne exclaimed at last, as the omnibus drew up at a lighted door, and she saw the long line of carriages filling the rustic street from end to end.

Miss Green and the Champernownes marched at once to the cloak-room, an upper room over the shop, whither Lady Hartley followed. The

Marchant girls fell back, and lingered in the vestibule—said vestibule being neither more nor less than the cabinet-maker's empty shop, transformed by scarlet and white draperies and evergreens in pots. The Marchants felt that Lady Hartley's hospitality came to an end at the door of the ball-room, and that they would do ill to attach themselves to her party.

"I think we had better wait here for our chaperon," said Eve, as Maud looked back at her from the stairs. "I'm sure we can never be too grateful to you for bringing us, Lady Hartley."

"Please don't speak of such a trifle. I am to take you home, remember. You must look out for us at three o'clock."

"At three o'clock," thought Jenny, of the tartan shawl; "that's as much as to say, 'In the mean time we don't know you.'"

They waited in a little group near the stairs, and saw the three Champernownes come sweeping down, swanlike, beautiful, "in gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls," and Miss Green in a very severe, tight-fitting yellow silk frock, with a shortish skirt, and round her homely-com-

plexioned throat a collet necklace of emeralds without flaw or feather; and Lady Hartley in a fuss and flutter of palest blue, which seemed just the most telling background for her diamonds. She had diamonds everywhere, butterflies, stars, true lovers' knots, hearts, and horseshoes, dotted about bust and shoulders amongst the soft fluffiness of azure gauze; diamonds in her hair, in her ears, on her arms. And yet she did not look vulgarly fine. The slender elegance of her form, the delicate colouring of her face and neck harmonized the jewels.

While the Hartley party were composing themselves for their entrance to the drawing-room, a stout matron in red satin and black lace came sailing in, wrapped to the eyes in a white Shetland shawl, and at once made for the Marchants, whom she deliberately kissed, one after the other.

“I hope you haven't been waiting long, dears,” she said, in a fat, good-natured voice. “Ponto had a business appointment at Haslemere, and didn't get back to his dinner till nine o'clock.”

Mr. Ponto was grinning in the background,

very red and puffy, as from a hurried toilet, and with a scarlet camelia in his button-hole ; scarlet out of compliment to the hunt.

“Oh no, we have only just come,” answered Eve, troubled by the supercilious stare of the youngest Miss Champernowne, who was looking back from the threshold of the ball-room while the others went in, looking at Mrs. Ponto as at some natural curiosity ; and indeed to a young lady whose evening frock had been produced new and immaculate from a Bond Street carton Mrs. Ponto’s crimson satin, lately done up with new Nottingham lace, and obviously “let out” to accommodate Mrs. Ponto’s increasing bulk, was a thing to wonder at.

The three Marchants and their chaperon entered the ball-room in a cluster. The Redwold Towers party was absorbed in the brilliant throng, had gone straight into the zenith, where the two local peeresses were holding a kind of court, a court splendid with family diamonds and hereditary *point d’Alençon*. Mrs. Ponto made a dash for a corner of the raised bench that went round the room, and established herself and her charges in this coign of vantage.

"If we don't get seats at once we mightn't have a chance of sitting down for an hour," said Mrs. Ponto. "Ain't the room full? Now, dears, I shall stay here till some one takes me in to supper, so you can leave your fans with me, and feel you've got some one to come to between your dances. I had my cup of tea before I came, so I shan't trouble about the tea-room. It's a pretty sight, ain't it?"

A waltz was just ending. The room was very full, but there was the usual surplus of nice looking girls sitting down, with the usual sprinkling of men who wouldn't dance, and who were quite satisfied to stand about and get in the way of the dancers.

The peeresses and their court were on the opposite side of the room, in a central position, which commanded dancers, band, and the festooned archway leading to the tea-room. Lady Hartley had seated herself next old Lady Mandelford, a dowager with white hair, whose son was the well-known Lord Mandelford, a man of prodigious wealth and local importance, a rustic Royalty.

Eve had shaken out her well-worn white frock.

It was made of some soft woollen stuff, which her old servant Nancy had washed, so it had at least the merit of purity. On that tall and perfectly balanced figure the cheap, simple gown looked exquisite, and the fair fluffy head, with its glitter of starlets, could not have looked more enchanting had the starlets been old Brazilian diamonds, like Lady Mandelford's, instead of cut glass mounted at Birmingham. The younger sisters had aimed higher than Eve. One in blue, the other in red, straining after Parisian fashion, in cheap silk and satin, had only achieved tawdriness. Eve, in her white frock, might challenge criticism.

There was some one on the other side of the room who thought her lovely as a dream, the same man whose eyes had gazed on her beauty in the moonlight an hour ago, and who had told himself that such a face belonged to fairyland rather than to this dull, everyday earth. He stood looking at her now, across the dancers and the crowd, as she sat demurely in her corner, her alabaster fairness set off by the scarlet background. He put his arm through Sir Hubert's. "When you've done talking to Miss Champer-

nowne I want you to introduce me to Miss Marchant,” he said.

“With all my heart. But there are three Miss Marchants. Which of the three are you dying to know?”

“The fair girl, in white.”

“Oh, she’s the eldest. They are all fair, but I suppose she’s the fairest. Come along, then. I’m to dance the Lancers, Maud tells me,” he added, lowering his voice, “and with Lady Mandelford. I’m to steer the dowager through that complicated performance.”

Sir Hubert wore the hunt colours, a scarlet coat with black velvet collar and white satin facings, and he felt that it behoved him to make some sacrifice in honour of a dance that was called the hunt ball.

“Don’t forget that you have engaged yourself to us, Mr. Vansittart,” said Miss Green, severely. “You are bespoken for eight dances out of eighteen. Three of the eighteen are gone already. You will have to make the most of the seven that remain to you after you have done your duty to us.”

He had forgotten all about those pledges

given in the morning-room. Eight dances with young women for whom he cared not a straw, about whom familiarity had bred something not very far from contempt. Eight dances, a veritable bondage; while Eve Marchant—otherwise Titania—was sitting meekly in her corner, partnerless. No, not partnerless; even as he looked little Mr. Tivett marched up to her with an all-conquering air, and led her in among the dancers, just beginning a waltz.

Vansittart took Miss Green's programme out of her hand with a desperate air.

"Let's begin at once—if you are disengaged," he said.

"That makes one off," she answered, laughing, as she rose and took his arm. "How dreadfully sorry for yourself you look."

"Then my looks belie me. I was never gladder for myself. I see you have ever so many engagements already. Shall I put myself down for number eighteen?"

"Certainly. You are sure we shall have left before that number arrives."

They were moving slowly among the dancers by this time, and a minute later they spun off

with a fine rhythmical swing. Miss Green was what the hunting men called a splendid mover. She had taken trouble to excel in her paces, knowing that her appearance was against ball-room triumphs. Men liked to dance with her—for three reasons. She was rich; she waltzed well; and she had a malevolent tongue, which amused her partners.

It was her delight to criticize her fairer sisters—the flaws in their beauty; the tricks which helped them to be beautiful; their affectations; their vanities; their bad taste.

"Did you ever see three young women 'fagotées' like those Marchant girls?" she murmured, in a low, clear voice, which she had cultivated for speaking evil of people near at hand. "That blue girl—that red girl! I don't know which is worse! The blue frock is an inch and a half shorter on one side than on the other—an advantage, as it shows off the blue slipper, which doesn't match the frock, and the blue stocking, which doesn't match the slipper. But the red girl! Please notice the lacing of the red bodice. I assure you the girl isn't hump-backed, though that bodice laced all askew certainly suggests deformity."

“How observant you are, Miss Green; and with what a keen eye for the infinitesimal!”

“I am looking at their chaperon now—the enormous person in dyed crimson satin. It must have been her wedding-gown ages ago—a sweet silver-grey. You don’t call that lady infinitesimal, I hope?”

“Physically large, perhaps—but, from your mental standpoint, microscopic. Now, confess, Miss Green, don’t you think these people infinitely insignificant, simply because they happen not to be rich?”

“I only think them immensely amusing. One only sees such people at public balls in the heart of the country. That is why public balls are such fun. Do look at the glass stars in the tallest Miss Marchant’s hair! Did you ever see anything so absurd?”

“What does it matter whether they are glass or diamonds of the purest water? All the gems that were ever ground at Amsterdam could not make her more like a beautiful sylph—Undine—Titania—what you will.”

“Your comparisons are not flattering to the young lady’s intellect. Undine was mindless

and soulless ; Titania — if Shakespeare knew anything about her—was a silly little person who fell desperately in love with a donkey.’

Their waltz was over, but Miss Green wanted tea, or an ice, or a change of atmosphere—anything which would retain Vansittart in attendance upon her as long as possible. She kept him sitting by her side while she sipped her tea, and ridiculed the people who came in and out of the tea-room. She kept him in bondage while Mr. Tivett conducted Eve Marchant to the buffet, and talked and laughed with her gaily as she ate her ice. How prettily she ate that pink ice—with such a graceful turn of the delicate wrist. Vansittart had leisure to study every line of head and figure, while Miss Green prattled in his ear. He gave a little automatic laugh now and then, feeling that the lady meant him to be amused. Miss Marchant was a long time eating her ice, and was evidently interested in Mr. Tivett’s conversation. Vansittart watched her dreamily, not more jealous of Tivett than if he had seen her a few years earlier, playing with her doll ; but just as she had resigned the empty ice-plate, and was moving towards the door, a man in a

hunt coat met and stopped her with a semi-authoritative air that made Vansittart's blood rush angrily to his brow, almost as if the man had insulted him.

"You are saving some dances for me, I hope, Miss Marchant?" said the unknown, with an easy, off-hand manner.

"I don't know," faltered Eve. "I mean I think I am engaged for a good many waltzes—as many as I shall care to dance."

"Let me see," taking her programme out of her hand. "Oh, you fair deceiver! Why, you might answer about this programme as Olivia did about her history—'A blank, my Lord.' I shall write myself against number seven—the dear old Manola—and eleven—a Waldteufel waltz—and, let me see, shall we say fifteen?"

The man was good-looking, dark-haired and dark-eyed, well set up, showing to advantage in the hunt coat—a man likely to be in request at a dance; yet it was evident that Eve Marchant wanted to avoid him. She looked pained and even angry at his persistence.

"My engagements are not upon that card," she said; "and I am sure you must have a great

many people with whom you ought to dance—sooner than with me.”

“That’s my business. I have set my heart upon at least three dances with you.”

“Then I am sorry to disappoint you; I am engaged for all those numbers.”

“But you are free for others? Tell me which.”

“That is Mr. Sefton, of Chadleigh,” said Miss Green, confidentially. “Rather handsome, ain’t he? But not good form. He is not a favourite in his own neighbourhood; but he and Miss Marchant are evidently upon very friendly terms.”

Eve had left the tea-room with Mr. Tivett, closely followed by Mr. Sefton, and Vansittart sat looking after the three retreating figures till they were absorbed in the crowd that filled the dancing-room.

“Did you think so?” he said coldly. “It seemed to me that the gentleman was not a favourite with the young lady.”

“If you had seen them on Christmas Eve on the ice you would have a very different opinion. He was teaching her the outside edge. He was devoted, and she seemed delighted. He would

be a great catch for her; but I'm afraid he's too much a man of the world to be trapped by a pretty face. He will look higher than Miss Marchant."

"What and who is he?"

"Oh, he belongs to a good old Sussex family, and has a fine place on the other side of Blackdown. I am told he is clever; but he is not nice, somehow. People don't seem to trust him. And there are ugly stories about him, I believe, stories that are not told to ladies, but which have made him unpopular in his own neighbourhood, especially among the lower classes—his own tenant-farmers and cottagers. There are the Lancers, and I am engaged to a callow youth who came with the Mandelford party."

She rose hurriedly, relinquishing her teacup, which Vansittart had been wearily waiting for, with an air of having been detained by his assiduity. The callow youth, looking very fair and pretty in his brand-new pink coat, appeared in the doorway.

"Oh, Mith Gween, I have been looking for you evewywha'," he murmured, and they went off to take their places.

Their vis-à-vis were Mr. Sefton and Miss Marchant.

"So she is dancing with him, after all," thought Vansittart, curiously vexed. "*Varium et mutabile semper femina!*"

CHAPTER IV.

“THE PRELUDE TO SOME BRIGHTER WORLD.”

WHILE the Lancers were being danced to the good old hilarious tunes, which always give an air of boisterous gaiety to a public ball-room, Vansittart, ignoring all further obligations to his home party, went in search of little Mr. Tivett, so that by impounding that gentleman he should make sure of an introduction to Miss Marchant before the next dance.

He found the agreeable Tivett in an anteroom, an apartment peculiarly affected by sitters out, and peculiarly congenial to flirtation, where the good little man had found agreeable occupation in pinning up the lace flounce of a portly matron in yellow satin, not too portly to indulge in round dances, which imparted an alarmingly purple shade to the pearly whiteness of her complexion.

"Only mother of pearl," as Mr. Tivett said afterwards. "You may be quite happy about your Mechlin, dear lady," said Tivett, after planting the last pin, "nothing but the stitches gone. No harm done to your lovely lace, I assure you."

"He was a clumsy bear all the same. How sweet of you, dear Mr. Tivett! Ten thousand thanks. And now I'll run back to my party, or my young man will be looking for me for the next waltz;" and the lady waddled away pantingly, to be steered carefully round the room by-and-by, in the protecting arm of a tall youth, who had an eye to free luncheons and dinners in the best part of Belgravia.

"You lucky little man," cried Vansittart, when the lady was gone, "in favour with both youth and age. You save Mrs. Fotheringay's priceless Mechlin, and you secure your first waltz with the belle of the ball."

Tivett gave a little conscious laugh, and shook his suède glove at Vansittart airily.

"Pretty girl, that Miss Marchant, ain't she?" said he, "and not a bit of nonsense about her; naïveté itself. You should have heard her and

the sisters prattle in the 'bus, while the Champnownes sat looking thunder."

"You dog, I believe that bronchitis of yours was all humbug. You were determined to stop inside the 'bus so as to make your wood with those girls. Come along with me, Tivett; I am going to waylay Miss Marchant, and you must introduce me to her."

"She'll be parading about with that black-muzzled man, most likely. I don't like to shoot another fellow's bird."

"Nonsense. She doesn't like the black man. She didn't want to dance with him. I am going to be Ivanhoe and rescue her from that black-bearded Templar."

"I couldn't quite make her out," said Tivett. "She seemed not to want to dance with him, and yet she let him march her off. I fancy there's an understanding between them. No doubt the puss is an arrant flirt," said Tivett, with his little coquettish shrug, as if he were flirting himself.

Miss Marchant and Sefton, the black-bearded, came into the anteroom at the head of a procession of youths and maidens, and in the confusion made by so many couples pouring out of the big

room into the small room, Vansittart contrived to waylay the lady. She dropped Sefton's arm and turned smilingly to Tivett, and in the next moment the introduction was made, while Sefton was simultaneously captured by the eldest Miss Champernowne, to whom he was engaged for the next dance.

Miss Marchant's programme was still a blank, and she allowed Vansittart to write down his name for a couple of waltzes. There was no question now of unwritten engagements blocking the way. He gave her his arm, and they walked slowly to the ball-room, talking those common-places with which even the most fateful acquaintance must needs begin.

Vansittart talked of the long, cold drive; of the rooms, with their red and white panels, and vizards and other emblems of the chase; of the heat and the draughts; of the people, the faces, the frocks. Easily as she had prattled with the lively Tivett, Vansittart found her somewhat reticent, and even shy. But she waltzed delightfully, and he had never enjoyed a dance better than this dance, in which his arm was round that slender waist, and that pretty, fair head with its

crystal starlets was almost level with his own, so tall and straight was she.

The waltz ended, these two dancing till the final chord, he took her for the conventional scamper through anteroom and tea-room, which communicated with each other by a canvas corridor, delightfully cool and dangerously draughty, and so back to the ball-room, where he restored her to the worthy lady in the red gown, with whom sat the younger Marchant girls, who were glad to dance one dance out of three ; like those hunting men of modest pretensions who were satisfied with a day a week. They were quite aware that although tolerated by the county, and invited to garden-parties, they were not in society, and must not expect that the fine flower of the hunt, greatly in request among a majority of the fair sex, would indulge them with more than an occasional dance. Secure of an after-supper waltz with Eve, Vansittart remembered his home engagements, tore himself away from Miss Marchant, and went across the room to that galaxy of the best people in which his sister had her place. The Champnownes were wandering with their partners,

but Miss Green was sitting by Lady Mandelford, and entertaining that mild old lady with the cheap cynicism which passes current for wit.

Vansittart booked himself for his second dance with Miss Green, and then went to look for the Champernownes. He found Claudia enjoying a confidential chat with Mr. Sefton in a corner of the anteroom, and avoided them both as if they had been plague-stricken.

He discovered a younger Champernowne in the tea-room, and offered himself for those dances so lightly promised in the morning. She had kept some numbers open for him. He went to the other sister and wrote his name on her programme for other two waltzes, and this, with his number on Miss Green's programme, and the two still owing to Claudia, left him a very poor chance of sitting out a dance or two with Miss Marchant. He pined for one quiet quarter of an hour of confidential talk with her. He wanted to make friends with her; so that she should prattle to him as freely as she had prattled to little Tivett.

That golden opportunity did not come till late in the evening. His dance with Claudia Cham-

pernowne came at just the hour when all the best people were pouring into the supper-room. When their waltz was over he could not avoid asking her to go in to supper, and she promptly accepted.

"There will be a crowd," she said, "but we shall get the first of the oysters, and the scrimmage will be more fun than a half-empty room."

It was an hour later when he danced his extra with Eve Marchant. The next dance was the Caledonians.

"Surely you are not going to dance the Caledonians?" he said. "It is a cruelty to keep the floor from all those portly matrons in fine raiment who are sighing for a square dance."

"I am happy to say I am not engaged for the Caledonians."

"Then let us go into that little talking-room. Of course you have been in to supper?"

Miss Marchant owned blushing that she had not supped.

"Poor dear Mrs. Ponto had been sitting so long in her corner," she said, "so I asked my last partner to take her in."

"Poor dear partner, I think. What a sacrifice

for him! Why, you must be famishing. And I'm afraid all the oysters must have been eaten by this time."

"I can be quite happy without oysters."

"Can you? The youngest Miss Champernowne was inclined to scold the waiters because of the poor supply of natives."

"The Miss Champernownes are used to such luxuries as oysters, and can't do without them," laughed Eve. "My sisters and I have been brought up in a harder manner."

"Curious, isn't it, how fashion changes?" said Vansittart, taking her to a little table in the furthest corner of the room—a tiny table that would only just accommodate two people. "When Byron was in society it was considered odious for a young woman to care what she eat, or to have a healthy appetite. Nowadays, it is rather chic for a girl to be a gourmet. We have bread-and-butter Misses affecting a fine taste in dry champagne and a passion for quails. And now what can I get you—mayonnaise lobster, truffled turkey, boar's head, chicken?"

She decided for chicken, and trifled with a wing while Vansittart sipped a glass of cham-

pagne, enchanted to have her all to himself in this corner, wishing that the Caledonians might last for ever, and inclined to be reckless about his engagement for the waltz that was to follow.

“You have been dancing every dance, I think,” he said.

“No; not all. I sat in my corner with Mrs. Ponto all through a most exquisite waltz.”

“Was it possible you had no partner?”

“Mr. Sefton asked me to dance—and I told him I was tired.”

“I have an idea you don’t much like Mr. Sefton?”

“No, he’s not a favourite of mine; but he has always been very kind to us all, and he has given my father some shooting; so I don’t want to be rude to him.”

“Was that why you danced the Lancers with him, after refusing him a dance?”

“How did you know I refused him? Ah, I remember, you were sitting in the tea-room. You must have heard all we said.”

“Every syllable.”

“How flattering to the lady who was talking to you!”

"Dear Miss Green ! Oh, she would not mind. She is so pleased with her own conversation that it does not matter whether people listen or not. She is a lady who shakes hands with herself every morning, and says, 'My dear soul, you are really the cleverest, wittiest, brightest creature I know—not exactly beautiful, but infinitely charming,' and in that humour she comes smiling down to breakfast, and lets us all see what poor creatures she thinks us."

"I see you can be ill-natured, Mr. Vansittart. You are not like Lady Hartley, who has always a kind word to say of every one."

"That is my sister's little way. She pays most of her debts with kind words."

"Ah, but she has given us more than words. She asks us to her delightful summer parties, and seems always glad to see us."

"She is very lucky to have such young ladies at her parties. What would a garden-party be if there were not faces in the crowd worth following and asking questions about ? But what of Mr. Sefton ? I am interested in Mr. Sefton."

"Why ?" she asked, with innocent wonder.

"Oh, for various reasons. My father and his father were once friends. And then he is a landowner, a great man in these parts, and one always wants to know about such people."

"Yes, he has a fine estate, and he is said to be rich ; but he is not as popular as his father was. I remember old Mr. Sefton, a splendid gentleman. But this Mr. Sefton and my father get on very well together."

"You say he has been kind. How kind ?"

"He asks my father to shooting parties, and he sends us game, and grapes, and pines. I would rather for my own part that he didn't, for we can give him nothing in return. Sophy wanted to work him a pair of slippers—preposterous—as if he were a curate ! My two nursery sisters offered to work him a set of mats in Russian cross-stitch. Imagine sending Mr. Sefton mats for his toilet table."

"He scarcely looks the kind of man to appreciate that particular form of attention. Tivett, now, would be delighted with such a gift. There is nothing too microscopic or too feminine to interest that dear little man."

"He is a dear little man. It is quite de-

lightful to hear him talk about London people and London parties."

"Did he set you longing to be in the whirl of a London season?"

"I don't know. It would be very nice for once in one's life; but I am quite happy in our country home, as long as—as," she faltered a little, "father is well and contented."

He felt that in this faltering phrase there was a hint of domestic cares. Hubert Hartley had told him, during a few minutes' talk on the omnibus, that Colonel Marchant had been a scamp, and was a difficult man to get on with.

"I always feel sorry for those five girls of his," Sir Hubert concluded.

"You are wise in liking your country life," said Vansittart. "It is the happier life. All my best days are at Merewood—our place near Liss. Do you know Liss, by-the-by?"

"No, indeed. I know there is such a place somewhere between here and Portsmouth."

"You must have passed it, I think. I dare say you sometimes go to Southsea or to the Isle of Wight for your summer holidays."

"You dare to say too much," she answered,

with her frank, girlish laugh. "We never go anywhere for our summer holidays. We live in the same house all the year round. When a poor man has five daughters he can't afford to carry them about to seaside lodgings, which are always dreadfully dear in the season, I am told. I think we ought to go back to the ball-room. I am engaged for the next waltz."

"And I, to a most exacting partner."

The waltz was half over when they entered the dancing-room, and Hilda Champernowne, who saw them enter side by side, looking very happy, was evidently offended.

"It is hardly worth while standing up," she said; "the waltz is just over."

"I thought it had only just begun."

"That shows how thoroughly engrossed you must have been."

"I was giving a young lady some supper, and a young lady who might have starved but for me."

"Impossible! The young lady was Miss Marchant, whom you yourself pronounced the belle of the ball. Mr. Tivett told me so."

"In such an assembly as this—where there is some of the best blood in England—there are

many belles," said Vansittart. "Will you come for a turn round the rooms, if you won't dance?"

The lady rose, and took his arm, somewhat mollified, and in the course of that turn—which could not, from the limited space, last very long—she questioned Vansittart sharply about Miss Marchant. Did he think her good style? Had he found her bright and clever in conversation, or was she very dull?

"The poor things go nowhere, I am told, except to garden-parties, where they are lost in a crowd of nobodies. It has been too sad to see them sitting with that awful woman in the red gown. Why do girls go to dances to endure such purgatory? I would as soon sit in the pillory, like Daniel Defoe, as in that corner with the crimson lady."

"Oh, but they have been dancing a good deal. Theirs is not quite such a piteous case as you make out."

"Have they really?" asked Miss Champenowne, with her most affected drawl; "I'm glad some one has taken compassion upon them. They've always been sittin' when I happened to look their way."

The Champernownes and the Marchants met an hour later in the cloak-room, and this time Lady Hartley formally introduced the Miss Marchants to the haughty Devonians, in the hope that this might make the return journey a little more sociable; a vain hope, for the Champernownes and Miss Green affected to be overcome by sleep as soon as they had settled themselves in the omnibus. So Mr. Tivett and the Marchants had all the talk to themselves, as before, with an occasional kindly word from the hostess, who was genuinely sleepy, and who dreamt that she and the Marchant girls were travelling in Italy, and that their carriage was stopped by brigands.

The brigand-in-chief was her own groom, who came to open the door, and assist the young ladies to alight at their own garden gate. But he was not allowed to do more than hold the door open, for Vansittart was standing on the whitened road ready to hand his partner and her sisters to the ground. They alighted as airily as Mercury on the heaven-kissing hill.

“Dear Lady Hartley, we have no words to

express our gratitude," said Sophy, as Maud shook hands with her at parting.

Eve was less demonstrative, but not less grateful, and the youngest of the three only murmured something unintelligible from between the folds of her tartan shawl.

Vansittart opened a low wooden gate. The house stood boldly out against the clear moonlit sky; but he had no time to look at it, for he was absorbed in guiding Eve Marchant's footsteps on the slippery garden path, while the groom followed in attendance on her sisters. The path was smooth as glass, and he almost held her in his arms as they went slowly up the sharp little hill that led to the rustic porch.

An old woman opened the door, and the three girls were speedily absorbed into a dark vestibule, a single candle glimmering in the distance.

"Are we very late, Nancy?" asked Eve.

"Not later than I thowt you'd be," answered the woman, with a north country accent; and then there was nothing for Vansittart to do except to wish the three sisters good night, and go back to the 'bus, where Sir Hubert was begin-

ning to be uneasy about his horses waiting in the frosty air.

"Cuts into them like knives," said Sir Hubert, as his brother-in-law clambered on to the box. "You might have made shorter work of seeing Miss Marchant to her door."

"I might have let her fall on that inclined plane," growled Vansittart. "Capital for tobogganing, but very dangerous for a young lady in satin shoes."

"Poor girl, I wonder where her next satin shoes will come from," said Hubert.

"Is the Colonel so very hard up?"

"Very, I should think, since he is always in debt to the little tradespeople about here."

"And on the strength of that you all talk about those three girls as if they were lepers," retorted Vansittart. "I have no patience with the pettiness of village society."

CHAPTER V.

TEATIME IN ARCADIA.

It was long since Vansittart had been haunted by the face of a woman as he was haunted by the face of Eve Marchant. He had not come to nine and twenty years of age without one or two *grandes passions*, which had begun out of a mere fancy, a glance—like one of those once fashionable toys called Pharaoh's Serpents—had swollen to colossal dimensions, and had ended, like the serpent, in a puff of smoke. This time he wondered at his own feelings when he found himself so deeply interested in the girl he always thought of as Titania. He was inclined to ascribe this sudden interest to the eccentric manner of their first meeting, the three pretty faces springing out of a turn in the wooded road, like sylphs in fairyland, the light, silvery

laughter, and the something of sadness in the fate of this bright, light-hearted girl which appealed to his deeper feelings.

To whatever circumstances he might ascribe his interest, the fact remained that he was interested; for he found himself thinking about Eve Marchant a great deal more than he had ever thought of any one subject, except that one fatal subject of his misadventure at Venice; and he found himself very bad company for other people in consequence.

For ten days after the ball at Mandelford he lived in expectation of seeing Miss Marchant again, somewhere, somehow; and to further that desire of his heart he lived in a state of perpetual locomotion; now driving one of the Hartley dog-carts to Mandelford or Midhurst, Fernhurst or Haslemere, as the case might be; and anon patrolling those towns and villages on foot, in the ardent expectation of meeting Colonel Marchant's daughters upon some shopping or visiting expedition.

Go where he would he drew blank. Could it be that the Colonel was so deep in debt to the local tradespeople that his daughters dared not

show themselves in those rural streets, where, after all, as the local gentry said condescendingly, one could really get almost everything one wanted?

He walked, he drove, he haunted the great pond in Redwold Park, which was thrown open to the public for skating, and where the men and maidens of the neighbourhood came daily to disport themselves: but vainly did he look for the Marchants.

"I thought the Miss Marchants were skaters," he said to Miss Green, on the third morning, as he helped her to put on her Mount Charles skates.

"So they are. They almost lived on this pond before Christmas. Perhaps they have worn out their boots, and are obliged to stay at home."

Those ten days of expectancy and disappointment made Jack Vansittart desperate. It seemed to him ages since the night of the ball. He began to think he should never see Eve Marchant again, and panic-stricken at this idea, he started after a morning's pheasant shooting to walk to the Homestead, Fernhurst, to make

a formal call upon the sisters. Surely he had the right to call and inquire how they had survived the fatigues of the dances, the perils of the cold drive home. He was quick to make up his mind that he had such a right, and no walk taken for pleasure or for health had ever been more exhilarating than that tramp from the westward shoulder of Blackdown to the further side of Fernhurst. The roads were hard and dry, the wind was north-west, and the sun was going down in wintry splendour. It was late in the afternoon to make a ceremonious visit, but there was all the better hope that he would find Colonel Marchant's daughters within doors.

The house stood high above the road, on a ridge of meadowland which had been encroached upon for half an acre of garden. It was a long, low house, with steep gable ends, and a high slanting roof, red tiled and lichen grown. Originally only a farm labourer's cottage, it had been expanded and improved by more than one tenant, the last addition being made by Colonel Marchant, who at the beginning of his tenancy had built a comfortable covered porch, which

served as vestibule, and a large room on the ground floor, which had been first known as the nursery, then as the school-room, and which was now simply the parlour, or general living room for the whole family. The resident governess, that element of respectability, had shaken the dust of Colonel Marchant's Bohemian dwelling-place off her feet a year ago, and had vanished into space, leaving a long arrear of salary behind her.

It was twilight, the grey twilight of a frosty winter day. Vansittart noted the snowdrops peeping over the snowy box border as he walked up the steep gravel path that made the only approach to the Marchant dwelling. Carriage approach there was none. The Marchant girls' cheap satin slippers had to trip down that gravel path, in fine weather or foul, when they went to a party, and the poor little feet inside the slippers had to dance away any feeling of chill and dampness which the sodden gravel might occasion.

Vansittart looked about him in the evening grey as he waited for the opening of the door. He had rung a bell that sounded twice too loud

for the size of the house, and had set up much barking of indoor and outdoor dogs.

There were two long strips of grass sloping down to the holly-hedge that shut off the road, and a long flower border on either side of the gravel path. This was the garden, so far as ornamental garden went, but beyond the grass strip on one side of the house there were cabbage rows, and the usual features of a vegetable garden. Beyond, right and left, stretched meadow-land, away to the dark background of copse and hillside.

The house, even after all its improvements, had a humble and homely aspect; walls roughly plastered, small square lattice windows, and that steep slant of the roof, which Vansittart could have touched with his hand. The porch was a roughly built square block, with a sloping thatch, and two little windows, right and left. An old woman, in a blue stuff gown and white cap and apron, opened the door, and even as it opened Vansittart heard again that ripple of silver-clear laughter which he had heard on the hilltop in the snowy night, nearly ten days ago.

Ten days. Only ten! Until ten days ago he

had lived in happy ignorance that there was such a woman as Eve Marchant in the world. It seemed to him now as strange not to have known of her as it would be not to know of her namesake—the universal mother.

The same sweet laughter, not loud or boisterous, but soft and clear! Her laugh! He would have known it amidst a chorus of laughing girls.

Miss Marchant was at home, the old woman told him, and thereupon led him through a small, dark room—the original cottage parlour—through another room, faintly lit by a low fire, into a third and much larger room, which was bright with fire and lamp light.

Here the whole Marchant family, except the Colonel, were assembled in the full enjoyment of afternoon tea, which in this establishment had come to be the most enjoyable, if not the most substantial, meal of the day.

Happily Vansittart had lunched lightly in the woods with the shooters, so was hungry enough to find the odour of toasting bread rather a comfortable addition to the atmosphere; or, at any rate, he was in a humour to be pleased with everything, even the sprawling attitude of a tall

overgrown girl in a yellow cotton pinafore, sitting on the hearthrug, and making toast, watched and assisted by a smaller sister.

The three grown-up Miss Marchants sat at the table, two of them with their elbows on the board, where a large home-made cake—in north-country phraseology, a plum-loaf—a glass dish of marmalade and another of jam, and a pile of thick bread and butter, testified to the serious purpose of the meal.

Eve, the tea-maker and mistress of the feast, rose as Mr. Vansittart was announced, and came forward two or three steps to greet him, half in firelight, half in lamplight, brilliant and full of colour as an early Italian picture. Her gown was bright red merino, which set off the fairness of her complexion, and the pale gold in her brown hair; such a cheap gown, if he had only known, bought at one of the sales for half its value, timid beauty being afraid of the strong colour.

The other two girls were in somewhat tawdry attire, skirts of one colour, bodices of another; but they were fond of colour at the Homestead, and girls with scanty purses cannot bend to the iron rule of fashion.

To Vansittart's admiring eyes, Eve's red gown was the most exquisite and artistic of garments. He who was generally so much at his ease in all kinds of company found himself hesitating a little as he said that he had come to ask them if they had quite recovered from the fatigue of the dance; and, if so, how it was they had not been on the ice in Redwold Park.

"But perhaps you are tired of skating."

"Tired? Why, we all adore it," cried Eve. "But we have been dreadfully busy, making our winter gowns."

The second week in January seemed to Mr. Vansittart a late date at which to set about the making of winter raiment. He did not know that for many young women with slender purses the January and July sales are the only periods for the purchase of drapery. Twice a year the Marchant girls treated themselves to third-class tickets from Haslemere to Waterloo, and spent a long day going from shop to shop to secure the utmost value for their poor little stock of cash.

"Yes; it's really dreadful to lose a week of this delicious hard frost, ain't it?" exclaimed

Sophy, much readier of speech this evening than her elder sister.

“Run to the kitchen and get me another teapot, Peggy,” whispered Eve; whereupon one of the girls started up from the rug and bounded off on her errand.

“Just as we were all improving in our skating,” said Jenny. “We had conquered the outside edge, and Sophy and I were beginning to grasp the right idea of the Dutch roll, and were aspiring to the grape vine.”

“And then the hockey,” interjected Sophy; “the hockey was too delightful.”

Again the fair head bent itself towards the hearthrug. There was another whisper, and the elder girl bounced up and ran off.

“She has gone for a cup and saucer, and I am going to give you some fresh tea,” said Eve, smiling at him as he sat in the Colonel’s chair, in that corner of the room which bore no traces of girlish litter. “I hope you don’t mind our waiting upon ourselves. We have only our old Yorkshire Nancy, and a little parlour-maid; and as it is the little maid’s afternoon out, here we are, five intelligent young people, ready to help each other.”

"I cannot conceive a more delightful spectacle. But why make fresh tea, Miss Marchant? I am sure there is some of your last brew which would do capitally for me."

"If I did not know you are saying that for kindness, I might think you one of those unsympathetic people who don't care for tea."

"Do tea and sympathy go together?"

"I think most nice people are tea-drinkers. Indeed, it seems to me that tea is the link that holds society together. Oh, what should we do with our afternoons—however could we go and call upon people—if it were not for afternoon tea?"

"And I see that afternoon tea, with you young ladies, is a somewhat serious function," said Vansittart, with a glance across the well-spread table to the pile of toast which Sophy was buttering.

The younger girls had come back, one with a china teapot, the other with a cup and saucer, and Eve was busy with her second brew.

"Please don't laugh at us. We are a very irregular family in the matter of luncheon, and this is our hungriest meal."

The youngest girl, who had resumed her seat on the hearthrug, was at this juncture seized with a tendency to motiveless giggling, which she vainly endeavoured to suppress, and which speedily communicated itself to the youngest but one, also seated on the rug.

"Those children are too absurd," exclaimed Sophy, after trying to frown them into good behaviour. "They are always laughing at nothing."

"The happy disposition of early youth," said Vansittart, "a golden age when we are ready to laugh at everything. Riper years change laughter into groaning."

"She said it was our hungriest meal!" gasped Hetty, of the yellow pinafore, in convulsions of undisguised laughter; "I should rather think it was."

"I suppose these young ladies are not yet promoted to late dinners?" hazarded Vansittart, wondering a little why this question of afternoon tea could afford such scope for mirth.

"No, we don't dine late," protested Hetty, more and more hilarious. "*We* don't, do we, Peggy?"

Peggy, the white pinafored youngest, was speechless with laughter.

Vansittart began to divine the mystery. In this household of narrow means there was no late dinner for the ladies of the family. There was doubtless a dinner for the Colonel. Man cannot long support life without the regulation evening meal; but for this household of girls bread and jam and plum-loaves were an all-sufficient repast. Was low living—this diet of innocent bread and butter—one of the causes of Eve's peerless complexion, he wondered? All the girls were more or less pretty. It might be that this Arcadian fare had something to do with their prettiness.

Never had he enjoyed a meal so much as that afternoon tea in the Marchants' parlour. As he sat looking at the room in the light of the large lamp in the centre of the table he began to think he had never seen a prettier room for a family to live in. The fireplace was wide and spacious, an open hearth, with a high projecting mantelpiece, and narrow shelves over that, slanting upward to the ceiling, and dotted about with trumpery blue teacups, and yellow and red

vases from the Riviera. The Colonel had begun with the intention of making an ingle nook, but being told, in the rustic builder's phraseology, that an ingle nook would run into money, he had contented himself with a wide fireplace and a projecting chimney. There was only black and white on the walls, a few etchings, and a good many photographs of pictures, against a dark red paper. There was a cottage piano in a corner, draped with a Bellagio rug of vivid amber, and there were other Bellagio rugs on the sofa, and on the Colonel's armchair. For the rest the furniture was of the shabbiest; clumsy substantial old chairs and tables that suggested the hindermost dens of the second-hand furniture dealer, those yards and back premises in which he keeps his least attractive goods. The room was uncarpeted, but crudely coloured Indian rugs of the cheaper kind brightened the oak-stained floor here and there, and gave a suggestion of luxury. The lamp in the middle of the round table was subdued by a large shade of art muslin, daintily frilled and ribboned, evidently a home production; the German tablecloth was of white and red damask, the crockery

was white, cheap but pretty, and there were a few winter flowers and bright berries in brown glass vases. Altogether that tea-table had a delightful aspect to John Vansittart. The room, the firelight, the fresh young faces, with that one fairest face shining like a star among the others, the giggling girls upon the hearthrug laughing at the idea of a dinnerless household, made up a scene of homely enchantment. Even a white fox-terrier which had begun by snapping at him, and which was now at his knee begging for toast, seemed part and parcel of the pleasant homeliness. It was teatime in a domestic fairyland, a fairyland where people eat slices of buttered plum loaf and hot frizzling toast; a fairyland odorous of tea and strawberry jam; a land where young women put their elbows on the table, and had no need of a chaperon to keep them in countenance during the visit of a young man; in a word, the fairyland of Bohemia. To Vansittart, who in England had known only the respectabilities, the everlasting laws and conventionalities of smart people, differing in detail with the fashion of the hour, but fundamentally the same—to Vansittart, the young man of pro-

perty and position, this glimpse of an unconventional household was as novel as it was fascinating. Pretty as Eve Marchant was, he would not have admired her half so much at a ball in Grosvenor Square. It was the touch of pathos, the touch of comedy in the girl's history and surroundings which interested him.

He sat long at the tea-table, and eat more buttered toast than he had eaten at a sitting since he was an undergraduate. He forgot even to ask if Colonel Marchant were at home, and had almost forgotten the existence of that gentleman when Hettie, the youngest but one, on being reproved for noisy utterance, replied, "It don't matter, father can't hear me at the Rag."

"Colonel Marchant is in town, I conclude," said Vansittart.

"He went up by the afternoon train," Eve answered with a stately air. "He is dining with some old chums to-night, and I don't think he'll be home before Saturday."

"I have not been fortunate enough to meet him yet."

"I'm afraid he's rather unsociable," answered Eve, suddenly serious, while over all the young

faces there spread a faint shadow of seriousness. "He lets us accept invitations—and I'm sure people are very kind to go on asking us when we can't pay them the proper respect of new frocks."

"What do people care about frocks?" exclaimed Jenny, the third daughter, with a Republican air. "If we are asked out it is because we are liked, in spite of our old frocks."

"Or because people are sorry for us," said Eve, gravely.

"I don't think people are ever sorry for youth and beauty," said Vansittart. "Both are objects of envy rather than of compassion."

"Oh, I can't follow you there," answered Eve; "everybody is young once. Youth is as common as chickweed or groundsel, and it lasts such a short time; and if one has to spend that one bright little bit of life in a state of perpetual hard-uppishness, I am sure one deserves to be pitied."

She talked of her poverty with an alarming frankness. Most people hide their indigence as if it were an ugly sore, or if they speak of it, speak softly, apologetically, or with an assumed

lightness, as if their poverty were not really poverty, but only a genteel limitation of means, implying none of the shortcomings and degradations of actual want. But this girl talked of her old frock and her father's poverty, without a blush.

"Father won't visit anywhere now," she said. "He can't forget that he once lived in a big house, and had a thousand acres of shooting, and bred his own pheasants. He can hardly bring himself to shoot other people's birds, even when they ask him to their big shoots."

"Your old home was in the North, I think?" said Vansittart, delighted at being let into the family secrets.

"In Yorkshire—within ten miles of Beverley. Do you know Beverley?"

"Yes; I was there once—a queer sleepy old place, once renowned for its corruption; now from a political point of view *nil*. A town with a Bar—a Bar which did something to Charles the First, I believe. Did Beverley shut him out, or did Beverley let him in after Hull had shut him out? My common or Gardiner history is at fault there."

They all laughed, seeing that he meant a joke, but unconscious of his drift.

“Beverley is a dear old town,” asserted Eve. “I haven’t seen it since I was twelve years old, but I can remember the countenance of every house in the market-place, and the colouring of every window in the Minster. Father won a cup at the races when I was eleven, and I took it home in the carriage with me. I remember having it in my lap, a great gilt cup. I thought it was gold till my governess told me it was only silver-gilt. Heaven knows what became of that cup! Father despised it. The race was a paltry affair, I believe, and his horse was a poor creature. He had won ever so many better cups at bigger races; but I only remember the cup I carried home, and the broad, bright common, and the blazing July day, and the happy-looking people. It was my last summer in Yorkshire, my last summer in the house where I was born. Before the next summer we all came here. Mother, and the governess, and the rest of us. Peggy was a baby in long clothes, and mother was only just beginning to be seriously ill.”

“And if you could have seen this place when we first came to it you would have pitied us,” said Sophy, who had more pretension than her sisters, and who thought that Eve had done more than her share of the conversation. “A parson’s family had been living in it, an overgrown family like us, but without the faintest idea of the beautiful. The parson’s wife kept poultry, and there were horrid wired enclosures close to the parlour window, and there was no porch, and no possibility of saying ‘Not at home’ to callers. There were only vegetables in the garden, potatoes and scarlet-runners, where we have made lawns.”

“She calls those long strips of grass lawns,” interjected Peggy, irreverently disposed towards a dictatorial grown-up sister who was not the eldest. Against Eve no one rebelled.

“And think how squeezed we all must have been till father built this room, and picture to yourself the mess and muddle we had to endure all the time it was being built. It didn’t matter to him, for he was out of the worst of it.”

“He had to take mother to the South that winter,” explained Eve. “She had been in weak

health for ever so long before we left Yorkshire. A weakly plant can't bear being torn up by the roots, can it? I think that change in our fortunes broke her heart—added to—to other things.”

She did not say what the other things were, and he could not ask her; nor would he ask her what had brought about the Colonel's ruin. He could make a shrewd guess upon the latter point. The value of landed property had gone down, and the man had kept a racing stud. Between those two facts there was ample room for change of fortune.

“Mother never came back to us,” said Eve, with a gentle sigh. “She is lying in the cemetery at Cannes. People have told me about her grave, and that it is in a lovely spot. There is some comfort in being able to think of that, after all these years.”

“I know that resting-place well,” said Vansittart. “There is no lovelier home for the dead.”

There was a brief silence. Even the children on the hearthrug were dumb, and there was no sound but the contented purring of Hetty's colossal cat, a brindled grey, with a fluffy white

breast, a cat that was satiated with the worship of pretty girls, and gave himself as many airs as if he had been kittened in Egypt, and ranked among gods.

"Dear as Beverley was, I hope you all like your Sussex home," said Vansittart.

"Sussex is well enough, but when one is used to a big stone house, with a picture-gallery, and one of the finest Jacobean staircases in the East Riding, it is rather hard to come down to a labourer's cottage that has been dodged and expanded into the most inconvenient house in the neighbourhood," said Sophy, with a grand air, and tilting her *retroussé* nose a little higher than usual.

Again the girls on the hearthrug burst into inextinguishable laughter.

"What a snob you are, Sophy," cried the blunt and outspoken Hetty. "You say all that as if you had learnt it by heart; and as for coming down, you came down to the labourer's cottage when you were eleven years old. You ought to be used to it now you are twenty."

Twenty. Sophy, the second, was twenty—and there was only a year between her and Vansit-

tart's incomparable she, who had migrated to Sussex when she was twelve. One and twenty, in the fair majority of her girlish charms. He thought it the most delightful period in woman's life—fair as in her teens, but wiser: mature for love and wisdom.

All earthly blisses must end. The blissfullest five o'clock tea cannot last for ever; but Vansittart was determined to make this endure as long as he could. The meal was finished. Even those long, lean hands of the youngsters had ceased to be stretched harpy-like towards the table for more bread and jam, or another slice of cake, which an elder sister dispensed with somewhat offensive comments upon the ravenous maw of youth.

"Oh, come now," cried the offended Peggy. "Suppose I do eat a lot; I haven't stopped growing yet. You have, yet I've heard you say you could sit and eat one of Nancy's plum-loaves all the evening. But that was when there was no one here but ourselves."

Sophy blushed furiously, and Vansittart came laughingly to the rescue.

"I can vouch for the seductiveness of Nancy's

plum-loaf," he said. "I think I must coax her to impart the recipe to my mother's cook. Is your Nancy a coaxable person?"

"Not very. She adores us, but she is rather gruff and grim to the outside world. She was in father's service as kitchen-maid when she was fourteen, at the time of his marriage, ages before I was born," said Eve.

Ages. Yet she was the eldest. What did that word ages mean? Three years, perhaps, in a young lady's vocabulary.

"And she followed your fortunes from the old home, and she is as faithful as Cabel Balderstone, I dare say," said Vansittart, and felt in the next moment that it was precisely one of those things he had better have left unsaid.

"She is just like Caleb," replied Eve, frankly accepting the suggestion, "just as faithful and true. I feel sure that if it were suddenly put upon us to give a dinner, and there were a saddle of mutton or a fore-quarter of lamb hanging conveniently before a neighbour's fire, Nancy would elope with it just as audaciously as Caleb made off with the cooper's spit—all for the credit of the family. She works like a slave for us from

morning till night. She is a splendid manager, and she makes tea-cakes as only a Yorkshire-woman can."

"And in cooking she could give points to many of your professed cooks," said Jenny. "Father is a difficult man in the matter of dinner."

"And dinner is a difficult matter for poor people," laughed Eve, to the annoyance of Sophy, who had not yet taken to heart the foolishness of the ostrich family, and who was always anxious to slur over an impecuniousness which was visible to the naked eye. It was only Eve who had learned to grasp the family nettle, and was never ashamed of her poverty. Perhaps it was her country life, among green fields and blackthorn hedgerows, and chestnut copses, and the barren heather-clad hills, which had kept her free from the age's worst fever, the sickly longing for wealth. Had she been reared in Pimlico or Brompton, she too might have been spoiled, her nature warped, her mind tainted with the sordid thirst for gold, the desire for finery and fine living, the aching envy of rich men's daughters. The people she knew and mixed with were

county people, who wore their old gowns, and lived simple, old-fashioned lives when they were in the country, and left their modern vices behind them in London ready for use next season.

Vansittart glanced at a cheap little American clock ticking among the cups and vases on the chimney-piece. A quarter past six, and his watch had told him that it was a quarter before five as he approached the Homestead.

"I don't know how to apologize for staying so long," he faltered, as he rose from the Colonel's comfortable chair and extricated his hat from the reluctant paws of the grey cat.

"Don't apologize," said Jenny, who was the pertest of the sisters; "there is nothing so unflattering to one's amour propre as a short visit. And then there are so many of us. A visitor must stay a longish time in order to give each of us a civil word."

Vansittart's conscience smote him at this remark. He feared that he had addressed his conversation exclusively to Eve. He had no consciousness of having spoken to any one else. For him the room had held only Eve; only that one salient figure. The others were faintly

sketched in the background. She was the picture.

He got out of the room somehow, after shaking hands all round, and even in his deep trance of love he was conscious that the two youngest hands were sticky with traces of strawberry jam. There being no one else to show him out—for who could disturb Nancy, remote in the kitchen, with futile ringing of a ceremonial bell?—the whole bevy of sisters accompanied him to the outer door, the youngest carrying a tall candle, which threatened to topple over and rebaptize her in a fountain of ozokerit. He had time to notice the rooms through which they went—one shabbily furnished as a dining-room, with an old harpsichord for sideboard; the other evidently the Colonel's den for books, boots, and tobacco. He had time to note the porch or vestibule, where there hung much outer apparel, feminine and masculine, hats, scarves, fishing basket, sticks of all shapes and thicknesses, mostly from native woods and hedgerows. He had time to note everything during that lingering departure, protracted by much idle talk about the roads and the weather: and yet while his eye took in the

shabbiness and smallness of those two rooms, the rustiness of the Colonel's overcoats, mind and eye both were filled with but one image—the figure of a tall, fair girl, whose fluffy head overtopped all her sisters, and shone conspicuous among them all (as it would have shone, he thought, amidst a thousand), by its fresh and innocent beauty.

“And that is the girl I love; and that is the girl I mean to marry,” he said to himself, as he walked briskly down the steep gravel path, and along the footpath towards Blackdown.

After such dawdling in Armida's parlour he would have to walk his fastest to be in time to dress for the eight o'clock dinner.

CHAPTER VI.

“LOVE STANDS UPON THY LEFT HAND AND THY
RIGHT.”

WHY should he not marry Colonel Marchant's daughter? Vansittart asked himself, in the quiet of those night watches which are said to bring counsel.

Why should he not marry Eve Marchant? asked Jack Vansittart of Counsellor Night. He was lord not only of himself but of a handsome income and a desirable estate. He had nobody to please but himself, and—well, yes, he wanted to please his mother, even in a matter so entirely personal as his choice of a wife. She had been so devoted a mother, and they had loved each other so dearly! In all his life he had kept only one secret from her, the secret of that night at Venice. In all his life he had only once told

her a lie ; when he told her he had not been in Venice during that last Italian tour. He wanted to please her, if it were possible, in this most serious question of his marriage. He knew that she loved him too unselfishly to be sorry that he should marry, albeit marriage must in some wise lessen their companionship as mother and son. The major half of his existence must needs belong to the woman he chose for his wife. His mother was resigned to take her lesser place in his life, she had often told him, provided that the wife were worthy.

“Pure as well as beautiful, sprung from an honourable race, reared by a good and careful mother.”

These were the conditions she had laid upon his choice. What would she think of Colonel Marchant's daughter, motherless, the child of a disreputable father, a girl reared under every social disadvantage ; a girl who had dragged herself up anyhow, according to village gossips ; a girl who had neither accomplishments nor education, and who had shown herself an audacious flirt, said the village—for Eve's frank freedom of speech and manner was the rustic idea

of audacity in flirtation? To talk easily and freely with a man under forty was to be an outrageous flirt. The rustic idea of a well-conducted young woman was simpering silence.

What would his mother think of such a choice; his mother, who had been born and bred in just that stratum of English respectability which is narrowest in its sociology and strongest in its prejudices; his mother, who belonged to the county families, those deeply rooted children of the soil to whom the word trade is an abomination; who think that the Church and the Army were established for the maintenance of their younger sons, who consider they make a concession when they send a son to the Bar, and who shudder at the notion of a doctor or a solicitor issuing from their superior circles? What would Mrs. Vansittart think of an alliance with the daughter of a man whose name was dishonoured, who, albeit he too had been born of that elect race, and was indisputably "county," had made himself a pauper and an outcast by his misconduct, and who had lived for the last nine years in a Bohemian and utterly intolerable manner, spending his time mysteriously in

London, letting his daughters run wild, and having to be summoned for his rates and taxes?

The charges against Colonel Marchant, as Vansittart had heard them, were manifold. He had begun life in a marching regiment, without expectations, had married a lovely girl of low birth, or supposed to be of low birth, since her pedigree was unknown to Sussex, and her antecedents and uprising had never been explained or expounded to the curious in the neighbourhood of the Colonel's present abode. Within two years of this marriage he had succeeded, most unexpectedly, by the death of a young cousin, to a fine estate in Yorkshire, considerably dipped by previous owners, but still a fine estate, and had immediately begun a career of extravagance, horse-racing, betting, and disreputable company, which had ultimately forced him to sell mansion and manor, farms and homesteads, that had belonged to his family since the Commonwealth, when the lands of East Grinley were bestowed by Cromwell on one of his finest soldiers, Major Fear-the-Lord Marchant, an officer who had helped to turn the fortunes of the day at Marston Moor, and who had been left for dead on the field of Dunbar.

Colonel Marchant had kept race-horses, and in his latter and worst days—when ruin was close at hand—had been suspected of shady dealings in the management of his stud, and had been the subject of a Jockey Club inquiry, which, albeit not important enough to become a *cause célèbre*, had left the Colonel with a tarnished reputation on the Turf, and the dark suspicion of having made a good deal of money by in and out running. He withdrew from the racing world under a cloud, not quite cleaned out, for the money he had won in the previous autumn served to buy the cottage near Fernhurst, and to carry his family from Yorkshire to Sussex. Here he established his lararium and began life anew, a ruined man, with five young daughters and an invalid wife.

Of Colonel Marchant's existence at the Homestead local society had very little to say, except in a general way that he was not "nice." He neglected his daughters, he never went to church, and he was always in debt. Maiden ladies and old women of the masculine gender used to speculate upon how long he would be able to go on before his creditors took desperate

measures. How long would Midhurst and Haslemere bear and forbear with a man who was known to be deep in debt in both towns? All this and much more had John Vansittart heard from various people since the night of the hunt ball, for he had laid himself out with considerable artfulness to hear all he could about the Marchant family. In the beginning of things, albeit Eve appeared to him in all the innocent loveliness of Titania, he had told himself that he could not marry into such a family. Such an alliance would blight his life. He would have all those five girls upon his shoulders. He would be disgraced and put to shame by a disreputable father-in-law.

And now in the night watches he told himself a very different story. He told himself that he should be a craven and a cur if he allowed Eve Marchant to suffer for her father's sins. What was it to him that the Colonel had squandered his money on third-rate racers, and had been suspected of in and out running on second-rate racecourses? He loved the Colonel's daughter; and as an honest man it was his duty to take her away from unworthy surroundings. Incl-

nation and honesty pointing the same way, he was determined to do his duty—yes, even at the risk of disappointing the mother he fondly loved.

So much for the night watches. He saw before him a fierce battle between love and prejudice, but he was determined to fight that battle.

The war began while this resolve was yet a new thing.

“So you have been calling at the Homestead, Jack,” said his sister at luncheon next day.

“Who told you that?” he asked curtly, reddening a little as he helped himself to a roasted potato.

“One of those little birds of which we have a whole aviary. I drove into Midhurst this morning to talk to the fishmonger, and met the two Miss Etheringtons. They saw you going in at Colonel Marchant’s gate yesterday afternoon.”

“I wonder they didn’t wait outside to see when I came out again,” said Vansittart.

“I dare say they would if it had been warmer weather. What could have induced you to call upon Colonel Marchant? Colonel, indeed! Colonel of a Yorkshire Volunteer regiment! I

don't believe he was ever any higher than ensign in the 107th."

"Very likely not. But I didn't call upon the Colonel; I called upon my partners at the hunt ball."

"And no doubt they received you with open arms!"

"They received me with true Yorkshire hospitality, and gave me some excellent tea, to say nothing of buttered plum-loaf."

"And I dare say they were not in the least embarrassed at doing the honours to a strange young man, without mother, or aunt, or so much as a governess to keep them in countenance."

"Why should they require to be kept in countenance? Surely five girls ought to be chaperon enough for each other?"

"They are the most unconventional young women I ever met with," said the eldest Miss Champernowne, who was a good judge of the conventional.

"They are very pretty, poor things," said Mrs. Vansittart. "It is sad for them to belong to such a father."

"You might spare your pity, mother," exclaimed her son, growing angry. "I don't know anything about Colonel Marchant ; but I haven't the slightest doubt that the things that are said about him in this neighbourhood are the usual exaggerations and distortions of the truth. As for his daughters, I never made the acquaintance of five brighter, healthier, merrier girls. The household is full of interest for me ; and I want you to call at the Homestead with me, mother, and see with your own eyes what manner of girls Eve Marchant and her sisters are."

"I call upon them, Jack !" exclaimed his mother. "I, who am only a visitor here ! What good could that do ?"

"Plenty of good, if you like. You don't live quite at the other end of England. From Haslemere to Liss is not half an hour's journey ; and if you happen to like Miss Marchant—as I think you will—you might ask her to visit you at Merewood."

A light dawned upon the hitherto unsuspecting mother, a light which was far from welcome. She sat looking at her son dumbly.

“Why not ask the whole five, while you are about it, Mrs. Vansittart?” said Claudia Champowne, her thin lips contracting a little, as if she, too, saw cause for offence in Vansittart’s suggestion.

“My dear Jack, you must know I am the last person in the world to invite strange young women to my house—young women whose Bohemian ways would make me miserable,” remonstrated Mrs. Vansittart, severely. “I can’t think what can have put such an idea into your head.”

“Christian charity, no doubt,” sneered Claudia.

“Well, after all, these girls are not actually disreputable,” pleaded Lady Hartley, who was always good-natured; “one sees them at all the omnium gatherums in the neighbourhood, and they don’t behave worse than the general run of girls. If you had asked me to take notice of them, Jack, I could understand you—but to bother mother, mother who lives in another county, and who can’t be supposed to care about taking up strange girls.”

“So be it, Maud. You shall go with me the next time I call at the Homestead.”

“What, you are actually going to keep up a

calling acquaintance with the Marchant girls? How very eccentric."

"Yes, I am going to keep up my acquaintance with the Miss Marchants. I am going to make myself acquainted with their father. I am going to see with my own eyes whether Lucifer is quite as black as he is painted," answered Vansittart, doggedly.

"You won't like the Colonel. I am positive upon that point," said Maud. "Hubert is an excellent judge of character, and he couldn't stand the Colonel; although he felt sorry for the man and tried to be civil to him. Colonel Marchant is an impossible person."

"What has he done that makes him impossible?"

"Oh, I really can't give you the exact details; but they say all sorts of unpleasant things about him."

"‘They say.’ We know who ‘they’ are—an unknown quantity, which, when inquired into, resolves itself into half a dozen old women of both sexes."

"Unhappily everybody knows that he is in debt all over the neighbourhood."

“He must be a remarkable man to have found a neighbourhood so trustful.”

“Oh, I suppose he pays a little on account from time to time, or he would not be able to go on anyhow; but really, now, Jack, you can’t expect me to be on intimate terms with a household of that kind. I am very glad to have those poor girls at my garden-parties, for they are pretty and tolerably well-behaved, though their frocks and hats are too dreadful. What did I tell you Lady Corisande Hauberke called those poor girls when she saw them here last summer, Claudia?”

“Lady Hartley’s burlesque troupe.”

“Yes, that was it—Lady Hartley’s burlesque troupe! They were all three dressed differently—and so fine—especially the two younger. The eldest is a shade more enlightened. One wore cheap black lace over apricot silk—you are a man, so you don’t know what cheap black lace means—and a Gainsborough hat. Another was in peach-coloured cotton—that papery, shiny cotton, which is meant to look like silk, with a straw sailor hat all over nodding peach-coloured poppies—and her parasol!—heavens, her parasol!

bright scarlet cotton, and six feet high ! Lady Corisande was immensely amused."

"Is poverty so good a joke?" asked Vansittart, black as thunder.

"Oh, it wasn't their poverty one laughed at. It was their utter want of knowledge, their child-like ignorance of our world and its ways. If they had all three worn clean white frocks and neat straw hats they would have looked charming. It was the effort to be in the height of fashion——"

"With colours and materials three years old," put in Claudia.

"I tell you it is poverty you laugh at—poverty alone that is ridiculous. We have arrived at a state of things in which there is nothing respected or respectable except money. We pretend to honour rank and ancient lineage, but in our secret hearts we set no value on either unless sustained by wealth."

"What a tirade!" cried Lady Hartley, "and all because of a little good-natured laughter at those girls' frocks. To think that a pretty face, which you have seen only twice, should exercise such dominion over you!"

The ladies left the dining-room in a cluster to

put on their hats for a walk to the ice. Skating was the rage at Redwold Towers, and even Mrs. Vansittart went to look on. She liked to see her son and daughter disporting themselves, each an adept in the art; and then there was the off-chance of meeting the German nurse with the year-old baby somewhere in the grounds before sunset. The baby had already taken a strong grip upon the grandmother's heart.

John Vansittart did not go with the skaters, as it had been his wont to go. Nor did he offer to keep his mother company in her afternoon walk. He was in a sullen and resentful mood, resentful of he knew not what; so he started on a solitary ramble in the Redwold copses, where he would have only robins and jays and chaffinches, and the infinite variety of living things whose names he knew not, for his companions.

He was angry with all those talking women, his sister first and foremost; but most of all was he angry with himself.

Yes, it was her beauty that had caught him, that picture of Titania delicately fair against the darkly purple night, her pale gold hair, her sapphire eyes shining in the starlight. Yes, his

sister's light and reckless tongue had hit upon the humiliating truth. It was only because this girl appealed to his fancy that he was so eager and so angry, this girl whom he had seen the other night for the first time, of whose heart, character, antecedents, kindred, he knew absolutely nothing. It was only because she was so lovely in his eyes that he was prepared to champion her, ready to marry her if she would have him.

"I am a fool," he told himself, "an arrant fool, a fool so foolish that even shallow-brained Maud can see my folly. I know nothing of this girl, absolutely nothing except that surface frankness which passes for innocence—and which might be assumed by Becky Sharp herself. Indeed, we are told that it was Becky's guilelessness which always impressed people in her favour. May not this girl, daughter of a shady father, be every bit as clever and far-seeing as Becky Sharp? I dare say she is laughing at my infatuation already, and wondering how far it will lead me. Mr. Sefton too! Miss Green said there was an understanding between them. His manner was certainly a thought too

easy for respect. No doubt she is trying to hook Sefton, a landowner, one of the best matches in the neighbourhood. And she puts on that stand-offish manner of malice aforethought, to lead him on by keeping him off. I should be an idiot if I were to commit myself, without knowing a great deal more about the young lady. I have been getting absolutely maudlin about the girl. This is how half the unhappy marriages are made."

He stopped in his swinging walk, after tramping along the narrow muddy track at five miles an hour. The ring of the skates, the shouts of boys playing hockey, sounded clear upon the frosty air. He was not more than a mile from the pond as the crow flies.

"Sophy said their gowns would be finished this morning," he mused. "I wonder whether they will be on the ice this afternoon."

He tramped the narrow track between the thick growth of oak and fir, emerged from the copse, and struck out a path across some low-lying pastures to the pond or lake, which lay in the lowest part of Redwold Park, and only five minutes' walk from one of the lodges, where

some of the skaters kept their skates. There were a good many skaters this fine bright afternoon—an afternoon in which there was no consciousness of cold, though the atmosphere was twelve degrees below freezing point, just such a calm, clear atmosphere as Vansittart had often enjoyed in the Upper Engadine. There were a good many people on the ice—the villagers at one end of the long irregular-shaped piece of water, the gentry at the other—a rustic bridge dividing the classes from the masses. About twenty girls were playing hockey, the three Champernownes conspicuous among the rest by their fine carriage and sober attire. Those girls had certainly mastered the art of dress, Vansittart admitted to himself. They wore black serge gowns, cut to perfection by a fashionable tailor, black cloth jackets, tight-fitting, severe, with narrow collar and cuffs of Astrakhan, at a time when Astrakhan was not yet universal. Their hats were the neatest and quietest on the ice—black felt hats, with the least touch of scarlet in the loose knot of corded ribbon which was their only trimming. No wings, claws, or beaks; no anchors, arrows, crescents, or buckles of jet, gilt

or steel; none of those tawdry accessories which sometimes convert a young lady's headgear into a museum of curiosities. Long tan gloves, fresh and perfectly fitting, completed the toilet, which was worn alike by each sister, who had early realized the effect that is made in any public assembly by three handsome girls dressed alike.

Jack Vansittart paced the bank, stopping now and then to watch the skating, but with no inclination to put on his skates and join the revellers. The walk along the side of the lake was a pleasant walk, in some parts open to the water, in other places screened by hazel and alder. Here and there in a bend of the lake there was a hillock, on which the skaters sat to take off or adjust their skates, and on which the spectators sometimes stood to watch the sport.

From this point of vantage Vansittart surveyed the scene, and as he did so became conscious of a man standing on the opposite side of the lake, also surveying the scene. A second glance assured him that the man was Mr. Sefton. He had only seen Sefton at the ball, but he could not be mistaken in that sharp, hooked nose, sallow complexion, and black beard. It was Sefton,

lightly clad, as if prepared for skating, but holding himself aloof from the throng.

There was a fascination for Vansittart in this solitary spectator, and it was while watching him that he became aware of a new arrival. Sefton, whose hawk-like eyes had been looking up and down the lake, suddenly concentrated his attention on one spot at the end near the lodge, and as suddenly walked off in that direction. Vansittart imitated him on his side of the lake, and was speedily enlightened as to the cause of Sefton's movements. As he neared the lodge gate he saw three young women approaching—three young women in blue gowns, widely different in shade.

Now, the Champernownes and his sister—who talked of chiffons for an hour at a stretch—had dinned into his brain the fact that blue was not worn that winter. The colour might be a beautiful colour in the abstract, the colour of sky and sea, of sapphires and forget-me-nots, of children's eyes and running brooks, but it was a colour which no woman who respected herself would wear. It was "out," and that monosyllable meant that it was anathema maranatha.

And behold here came the three girls in their

new winter frocks, a blaze of blue; Sophy splendid in peacock cloth, trimmed with plush that *almost* matched; Jenny in uncompromising azure, the blue of Reckitt's and the British laundress; Eve less startling in a dark Oxford cloth, very plainly made, with a little home-made toque of the same stuff.

The fact was that the fashionable and popular drapers were almost giving away their blue stuffs that January, and the prudent Marchants had been able to get the best materials at a third of their value.

"And after all it isn't the colour, but the style of a gown that makes it fashionable or otherwise," Sophy had said philosophically, as she pored over a fashion plate, trying to realize a creation which nobody ever saw out of that fashion plate.

The girls seemed quite happy in their blue raiment, or at least the two younger girls, who greeted Vansittart with frank cordiality. Eve had a somewhat absent air as she shook hands, he thought, though her sudden blush thrilled him with the fancy that he might not be quite indifferent to her. He saw her glance away from

him while they were talking, and look right and left, as if she was expecting to see some one. Could it be Sefton? Mr. Sefton came across the ice while Vansittart was asking himself that question, shook hands with the three girls, and then walked away with Eve along the path, where the hazels and alders soon hid them from the jealous eyes that followed their steps. "Miss Green was right," thought Vansittart; "there is an understanding between them—they had made an appointment for this afternoon."

The two younger girls skipped off to an adjacent bank to put on their skates, and were soon provided with a pair of youthful admirers, both clerical, to assist them in the operation. Vansittart stood looking idly at the hockey-playing for some minutes, quite long enough to allow Eve and her companion to get a good way towards the further end of the pond, and then he turned and strolled in the same direction. As he sauntered on, disgusted with life and the world, which seemed just now made up of disillusion, he heard slow footsteps approaching him, just where the path made a sudden bend, footsteps and voices.

They were coming back, those two. They had not walked very far. The aspect of affairs was not quite so black as it had seemed ten minutes ago. He did not purposely listen to what they were saying. The sharp bend of the path, screened just at this point by a clump of hazels, divided him from them. Short of calling out to them to warn them of his vicinity he could not have avoided hearing what he did hear: only five short sentences.

"I am very sorry. It was a false scent," said Mr. Sefton.

"And we are no nearer knowing anything?"

"No nearer. I deeply regret your disappointment."

There was a lingering tenderness in his tone that made Vansittart feel a touch of the original savage that lives in all of us—a rush of boiling blood to brain and heart which hints at the hereditary taint transmitted by bloodthirsty ancestors. A few more steps and he and Miss Marchant were face to face, as she and her companion turned the corner of the hazel clump. She looked at him piteously through a veil of tears as they passed each other. Mr. Sefton had power

to make her cry. Surely that implied something much more than common acquaintance, nay, even more than friendship. All the tragedy of an unhappy love affair might be involved in those tears.

He looked back. She and Sefton had parted company. He was talking to some men on the bank. She had joined her sisters on the ice, and was standing with her skates in her hand, as if debating whether to put them on or not.

Should he go and entreat to be allowed to kneel at her feet, and do her knightly service by buckling stiff buckles and battling with difficult straps? No, he would not be such a slave. Let Sefton wait upon her; Sefton, who had all her confidence; Sefton, who could bring tears to those lovely eyes.

Vansittart rambled off across the frozen pasture, turning his back resolutely upon the noise of many voices, the ringing of many skates.

"It was a false scent." How a false scent? What could that possibly mean? How in the language of lovers could that phrase come in? A false scent. "I deeply regret your disappointment." What disappointment? Why should

she be disappointed, and Mr. Sefton regretful? In any love affair between those two there could seem no reason for disappointment. Sefton was his own master, free to marry whom he pleased. Did he mean honourably by this girl; or was he only fooling her with attentions which were to end in unworthy trifling? Was he taking a base advantage of her dubious position to essay the seducer's part? From all that he had heard of Sefton's character Vansittart doubted much that he was capable of a generous love, or that he was the kind of man to marry a penniless girl whose father was under a cloud.

And she?—was she weak and foolish, innocently yielding her heart to a man who meant evil? or was she her father's daughter, an adventuress and a schemer by instinct and inclination, like Becky Sharp? Vansittart tried to put himself in John Sedley's place, tried to realize how a man may see honesty and sweet simplicity where there are only craft and finished acting. To poor vain Josh Becky had seemed all truth and girlish innocence. Only one man of all Becky's admirers had ever thoroughly understood her, and that man was Lord Steyne.

Vansittart walked a long way, engrossed by such speculations as these—at one time inclined to believe that this girl whom he so ardently admired was all that girlhood should be—inclined to trust her even in the face of all strange seeming, to trust her and to follow her footsteps with his reverent love, and if he found her responsive to that love to take her for his wife, in the teeth of all prejudice and opposition.

“Why should my mother be made unhappy by such a marriage?” he asked himself. “If I can prove that Eve Marchant is in no wise injured by her surroundings what more do we want? What are the surroundings to my mother or to me? Even if I had to pension the Colonel for the rest of his life I should think little of the cost—if it brought me the girl I love.”

After all, he told himself finally time was the only test—time must decide everything. His duty to himself was to possess his soul with patience, to see as much as he could of the Marchant family without committing himself to a matrimonial engagement, and without being guilty of anything that could be deemed flirtation. No, he would trifle with no woman’s feel-

ings; he would not love and ride away. He would put a bridle upon his tongue; he would be the very essence of discretion; but he would make it his business to pluck out the heart of the Marchant mystery. Surely among five girls he could manage to be polite and attentive, kind and friendly, without entangling himself with any one of the five.

Having made out for himself a line of conduct he walked back to the lake. The shadows of twilight were creeping over the grass. There were very few people on the ice. The Marchants had taken off their skates, and were saying good-bye to the two curates who had been their attendant swains.

"We have such an awful way to walk if we go by the high-road, and we must go that way, for the footpath will be snowed up," said Sophy. "It will be dark long before we are home."

The curates had, one an evening school, the other a penny reading coming on at half-past seven, so they were fain to say good-night. Vansittart came up as they parted.

"Let me walk home with you," he said; "I haven't had nearly enough walking."

"Then what a tremendous walker you must be!" said Jenny; "I saw you marching over the grass just now as if you were walking for a wager."

His attendance was accepted tacitly, and presently he and Eve were walking side by side, in the rear, while the two younger girls walked on in front, turning round every now and then to join in the conversation, so that the four made only one party.

Eve's eyes were bright enough now, but she was more silent than she had been at their tea-drinking, and she was evidently out of spirits.

"I'm afraid you didn't enjoy the skating this afternoon."

"Not much. The mornings are pleasanter. We came too late."

"Shall you come to-morrow morning?"

"Yes; I have promised my young sisters to bring them for a long morning. They won't let me off."

"Do they skate?"

"Hetty skates. The little one only slides. She is a most determined slider."

"Does Colonel Marchant never come with you?"

"Never. He does not care about walking with girls."

"Perhaps it is presumptuous in a bachelor to speculate on domestic feelings, but I think if I were a widower with five nice daughters my chief delight would be in going about with them."

"If you look round among your friends I fancy you will find that kind of father the exception rather than the rule," Eve answered, with a touch of bitterness.

They walked on in silence for a little while after this, she looking straight before her into the cool grey evening, he stealing an occasional glance at her profile.

How pretty she was! The pearly complexion was so delicate, and yet so fresh and glowing in its youthful health. Hygeia herself might have had just such a complexion. The features, too, so neatly cut, the nose as clear in its chiselling as if it were pure Grecian, but with just that little tilt at the tip which gave piquancy to the face. The mouth was more thoughtful than he cared to see the lips of girlhood, for those pensive lines suggested domestic anxieties; but when she smiled or laughed the thoughtfulness

vanished, lost in a radiant gaiety that shone like sunlight over all her countenance. He could not doubt that a happy disposition, a power of rising superior to small and sordid cares, was a leading characteristic of her nature.

She had natural cheerfulness, the richest dowry a wife can bring to husband and home. Presently, as he swung his stick against the light tracery of hawthorn and blackberry, a happy thought occurred to him. His sister had pledged herself to be kind to these motherless girls. Her kindness could not begin too soon.

"You are to bring your sisters to the ice to-morrow morning, Miss Marchant," he said presently. "What do you call morning?"

"I hope we shall be there before eleven. The mornings are so lovely in this frosty weather."

"The mornings are delicious. Come as early as you possibly can. After two hours' skating you will be tolerably tired, I should think—though you walk with the air of a person who does not know what it is to be tired—so you must all come to lunch with my sister."

"You are very kind," said Eve, blushing, and

suddenly radiant with her happiest smile, "but we could not think of such a thing."

"I understand. You would not come at my invitation. You think I have no rights in the case. Yet it would be hard if a brother couldn't ask his friends to his sister's house."

"Friends, perhaps, yes; but we are mere acquaintance."

"Please don't say anything so unkind. I felt that we were friends from the first, you and your sisters and I, from the hour we found you on the top of the hill, when I mistook you for fairies. However, all the exigencies of the situation shall be complied with. My sister shall write to you this evening."

"Pray, pray don't suggest such a thing," entreated Eve, very much in earnest. "Lady Hartley will think us vulgar, pushing girls."

"Lady Hartley will think nothing of the kind. She was saying, only a few hours ago, that she would like to see more of you all. You must all come, remember—all five. The Champernownes leave by an early train to-morrow morning," he added cheerfully; "there will be plenty of room for you."

"Are the Miss Champernownes going away?"

"Yes, they go on to a much smarter house, where baccarat is played of an evening, instead of our modest billiards and whist. My brother-in-law is a very sober personage. He is not in the movement. It is my private opinion that those three handsome young ladies have been unspeakably bored at Redwold Towers."

"I am very glad they are going," answered Eve, frankly. "We don't know them, so their going or coming ought not to make any difference to us. But there is something oppressive about them. They are so handsome, they dress so well, and they seem so thoroughly pleased with themselves."

"Yes, there's where the offence comes in. Isn't it odd that from the moment a man or woman lets other people see that he or she is thoroughly delighted with his or her individuality, talents, beauty, or worldly position, everybody else begins to detest that person? A man as richly endowed as Shakespeare or Scott must go through life with a seeming unconsciousness of his own powers, if he would have his fellow-men love him."

“I think both Shakespeare and Scott contrived to do so, and that is one of the reasons why all the world worships them,” said Eve, and on this slight ground they founded a long conversation upon their favourite books and authors. He did not find her “cultured.” Of the learning which pervades modern drawing-rooms—the learning of the *Fortnightly*, and the *Contemporary*, the *Nineteenth Century* and *Macmillan*—he found her sorely deficient. She had read no new books, she knew nothing of recent theories in art, science, or religion. She knew her Shakespeare and Scott, her Dickens, Thackeray, and Bulwer-Lytton, and had read the poets whom everybody reads. She had never heard of Marlow, and Beaumont and Fletcher were to her only names. She revelled in fiction, this old, familiar fiction of the great masters; but history was a blank. She had not read Froude; she had never heard of Green, or Gardiner, Freeman, or Maine.

“You will find us woefully ignorant,” she explained, when she had answered in the negative about several books, which to him were of the best. “We have only had a nursery

governess. She was a dear old thing, but I don't think you could imagine a more ignorant person. She came to us when I was six, and she only left us when Peggy was nine, and she would have stayed on as a kind of Duenna, only she had a poor, old, infirm mother, and she was the only spinster daughter left, and so had to go home and nurse the mother. She was very strong upon the multiplication table, and she was pretty good at French. She knew *La Grammaire des Grammaires* by heart, I believe. But as to history or literature! Even the little we contrived to pick up for ourselves was enough to enable us to make fun of her. We used to ask her why Charles the Second didn't make Erasmus a bishop, or whether Eleanor of Aquitaine was the daughter or only the niece of Charlemagne. She always tumbled into any trap we set for her."

"A lax idea of chronology, that was all," said Vansittart.

He walked very nearly to the Homestead, and was dead beat by the time he got back to Redwold Towers. He had been tramping about ever since luncheon. He and Eve Marchant

had done a good deal of talking in that four-mile walk, but not once had he mentioned Sefton's name, nor had he made the faintest attempt to discover the drift of that confidential conversation of which a few brief sentences had reached his ear. Yet those sentences haunted his memory, and the thought of them came between him and all happier thoughts of Eve Marchant.

His sister was considerably his junior, and he had been accustomed to order her to do this or that from her babyhood upward, she deeming herself honoured in obeying his caprices. It was a small thing, then, for him to request her to invite Miss Marchant and all her sisters to luncheon next day.

"Do you really mean me to ask all three?" questioned Maud, arching her delicate eyebrows in wondering doubt.

"I really mean you to ask all five. The little girls are coming to skate on your pond. Give them a good lunch, Maud. Let there be game and kickshaws, such as girls like—and plenty of puddings."

"All five! How absurd!"

"You said you would be kind to them."

“But five! Well, I don’t suppose the number need make any difference. What alarms me is the idea of getting too friendly with them—a dropping in to lunch or tea acquaintance, don’t you know. The girls are as good as gold, I have no doubt; but they lead such an impossible life with that impossible father—he almost always away, no chaperon, no nice aunts to look after them—only an old Yorkshire servant and a bit of a girl to open the door. It is all too dreadful.”

“From your point of view, no doubt; but lives as dreadful are being led by a good many families all over England, and out of lives as dreadful has come a good deal of the intellectual power of the country. Come, Maud, don’t prattle, but write your letter—just a friendly little letter to say that I have told you they are coming to skate, and that you must insist upon their stopping to lunch.”

He had found her in her boudoir just before dressing for dinner, and in the very act of sealing the last of a batch of letters. She took up her pen at his bidding, and dashed off an invitation, almost in his own words, with a thick stroke of the J pen under “insist.”

"Will that do?" she asked.

"Admirably," said Vansittart, with his hand on the bell. "All you have to do is to order a groom to ride to the Homestead with it."

"Hadn't I better invite Mr. Sefton to meet them?" inquired Maud, with a malicious little laugh.

"Why?"

"Because he is said to be running after Miss Marchant. I only hope *pour le bon motif*."

"However shady a customer Colonel Marchant may be, I shouldn't think any man would dare to approach his daughter with a bad motive," said Vansittart, sternly.

"The Colonel encourages him, I am told; so I suppose it is all right."

"You are told," cried Vansittart, scornfully. "What is this cloud of unseen witnesses which compasses about village life so that what a man owes, what a man eats, what a man thinks and purposes are common topics of conversation for people who never enter his house? It is petty to childishness, all this twaddle about Colonel Marchant and his daughters."

"Jack, Jack," cried Maud, shaking her head.

"I can only say I am sorry for you. And now run away, for goodness sake. We shall both be late for dinner. I shall only have time to throw on a tea-gown."

A footman brought Lady Hartley a letter at half-past nine that evening. Vansittart crossed the drawing-room to hear the result of the invitation.

"DEAR LADY HARTLEY,

"It is too good of you to ask us to luncheon after skating, and I know it will be a treat for my young sisters to see your beautiful house, so I am pleased to accept your kind invitation for the two youngest and myself. Sophy and Jenny beg to thank you for including them, but they cannot think of inflicting so large a party as five upon you.

"Very sincerely yours,

"EVE MARCHANT."

"She has more discretion than you have," at any rate, Jack," said Maud, as he read the letter over her shoulder.

"She writes a fine bold hand," said he, longing to ask for the letter, the first letter of hers that his eyes had looked upon.

"I'm very sorry the five are not coming," he went on. "Those two poor girls will have a scurvy luncheon at home, I dare say—dismal martyrs to conventionality. You must ask them another day."

"We'll see how to-morrow's selection behave," answered Maud, with her light laugh.

Vansittart was on the pathway by the lake before eleven o'clock, and he had a bad half-hour of waiting about before Eve and her two young sisters appeared at the lodge gates. He met them near the gates, and they set off for the ice together.

"I hear you only slide," he said to the little one, who was red as a rose after the long walk through the frosty air. "That won't do; you must turn over a new leaf to-day, and learn to skate. I'm going to teach you."

"That would be lovely," answered Peggy; "but I've got no skates."

"Oh, but we must borrow a pair or steal a pair. Skates shall be found somehow."

"Won't that be jolly?" cried Peggy.

The skates were found at the lodge, where

Vansittart coolly appropriated a pair belonging to one of the little girls at the nearest parsonage, and the lesson was given. A lesson was also given to Eve, who skated fairly well, but not so well as Vansittart after one winter's experience in Norway and another in Vienna. Mr. Sefton came strolling on to the ice while they were skating, and tried to monopolize Miss Marchant; but the young lady treated him in rather an off-hand manner, greatly to Vansittart's delight. He hung about the lake for some time talking to one or another of his neighbours, most of the young people of the neighbourhood and a good many of the middle-aged being assembled this fine morning. Towards one o'clock he came up to Eve, who was playing hockey with a number of girls. "Is the Colonel at home?" he asked.

"Yes, father came home last night."

"Then I'll walk over and see him. It's a splendid day for a good long tramp. Let me know when you and your sisters are leaving, that I may walk with you. That road is uncommonly lonely for girls."

"You are very kind; but we are never afraid of the road. And to-day we are not going home

for ever so long," added Eve, joyously. "We are going to lunch with Lady Hartley."

"That alters the case," said Sefton, prodigiously surprised. "Then I'll look your father up another day, when I can be of some use as an escort. I dare say Mr. Vansittart will see you home."

"Haven't I told you that we want no escort?" exclaimed Eve, impatiently. "One would think there were lions between here and Fernhurst."

"There are frozen-out gardeners and such-like, I dare say. Quite as bad as lions," he answered, as he turned on his heel, jealous and angry.

This fellow was pursuing her evidently, with some kind of suit, Vansittart thought. Could he mean to marry her? Could any man with an established position in the county mean to ally himself with Colonel Marchant?

Vansittart had seen the two talking, but had not been near enough to hear what they said. He rejoiced at seeing Sefton walk away discomfited. There was anger in his walk, in the carriage of his head as he turned away from her. He had been snubbed evidently. But if she snubbed him to-day, must she not have sometimes en-

couraged his attentions ? He had all the manner of a man to whom certain rights have been given.

They walked up to the house merrily, over the grey, frosty grass, Hetty and Peggy running on in front and racing and wheeling like fox-terriers, so elated by the day's delights. Peggy had distinguished herself on her borrowed skates. Her teacher declared she had a genius for skating.

Lady Hartley was sunning herself in the broad stone portico, waiting to receive her guests. Miss Green had gone out shooting with Sir Hubert and his party. There were only Mrs. Vansittart, Mrs. Baddington, and Mr. Tivett at home.

"Only us two men among all you ladies," said Tivett, cheerily, as they assembled before the huge wood fire in the drawing-room.

"Hadn't you better say us one and a half, Gussie?" asked Mrs. Baddington, laughing. "It seems rather absurd to talk of yourself and Mr. Vansittart as if you were of the same weight and substance."

Mr. Tivett, who was half hidden between Hetty and Peggy, received this attack with his usual amiability. "Never mind weight and

substance," he said; "in moral influence I feel myself a giant."

"Not without justification," said Vansittart. "If you were to compare Tivett's reception at a West End tea-party with mine you would see what a poor thing mere brute force is in an intellectual environment."

"Oh, they like me," replied Tivett, modestly, "because I can talk chiffons. I can tell them of the newest ladies' tailor—some little man who lives in an alley, but has found out the way to cut a habit or a coat, and is going to take the town by storm next season. I can put them up to the newest shade of bronze or auburn hair—the Princess's shade. I can tell them lots of things, and the dear souls know that I am interested in all that interests them."

"I never talk to Gussie Tivett without thinking how much nicer a womanly man is than a manly woman," said Mrs. Baddington, meditatively.

"Ah, that is because the former imitates the superior sex, the latter the inferior," answered Lady Hartley.

Eve sat in the snug armchair where Vansittart had placed her, silent, but happy, looking about

the room with its wonderful mixture of old and new ; furniture that was really old, furniture that cleverly reproduced the antique ; trifles and modern inventions of all kinds which make a rich woman's drawing-room a wonderland for the dwellers in shabby houses ; the tall standard lamps of copper or brass or wrought iron, with their fantastical shades ; the abundance of flowers and flowering plants and palms, in a season when for the commonalty flowers are not ; all those things made an atmosphere of luxury which Colonel Marchant's daughter needs must feel in sharpest contrast with her own surroundings.

She looked and admired without a pang of envy. She had taken her surroundings for granted a long time ago ; and so long as her father was able to pacify his creditors by occasional payments, and so long as rates and taxes got themselves settled without desperate measures, Eve Marchant was at peace with destiny.

While her senses of sight and scent were absorbing the beauty and perfume of the room, Mrs. Vansittart came in from a walk with the nurse and baby, and her son made haste to introduce his sister's guest.

“Mother, this is Miss Marchant,” he said briefly, and Eve rose blushing to acknowledge the elder woman’s greeting.

He would not commit himself, forsooth. Why, in the look he gave her as she rose shyly to take his mother’s hand, in the tenderness of his tone as he spoke her name, he was committing himself almost as deeply as if he had said outright, “Mother, this is the woman I love, and I want you to love her.”

Mrs. Vansittart, prejudiced by much that she had heard of the Marchant household, could but acknowledge to herself that the Colonel’s eldest daughter was passing fair, and that this sensitive countenance in which the bloom came and went at a breath, had as candid and innocent an outlook as even a mother’s searching eye could desire in the countenance of her son’s beloved. But then, unhappily, Mrs. Vansittart had seen enough of the world and its ways to know that appearances are deceitful, and that many a blushing bride whose drooping head and gentle bashfulness suggested the innocence that might ride on lions and not be afraid, has afterwards made a shameful figure in the Divorce Court.

CHAPTER VII.

HE WOULD TAKE HIS TIME.

THE luncheon at Redwold Towers was a very sociable meal. Lady Hartley was at all times a gracious hostess, and she was perhaps a little more attentive to Colonel Marchant's daughters than she would have been to guests of more assured position.

The meal was abundant, and served with the quiet undemonstrative luxury which steals over the senses like the atmosphere of the Lotos Island, with its suggestion of a world in which there is neither labour nor care, no half-empty mustard-pots, or stale bread, or flat beer, or unreplenished pickle-jars.

There was plenty of game, and there were those appetising kickshaws, Russian salads, and such like, which Vansittart had bargained for,

and cold and hot sweets in profusion. Hetty and Peggy eat enormously, urged thereto by Mr. Tivett, who sat between them; but Eve had no more appetite than might have been expected in a sensitive girl who finds herself suddenly in a new atmosphere—an atmosphere of unspoken love, which wraps her round like a perfume. Vansittart remonstrated with her for eating so little after a long walk and a morning on the ice; but she could but see that he eat very little himself, and that all his time and thoughts were given to her.

The cup of coffee after lunch was the most fragrant she had ever tasted.

“If I could only make such coffee as that father wouldn’t grumble as he does at our coffee,” she said.

“The still-room maid roasts her coffee every time she makes any,” said Lady Hartley. “I believe that is the only secret of success.”

She felt in the next moment how foolish it was to talk of still-room maids to this girl whose household consisted of two faithful drudges, and who no doubt had to do a good deal of housework herself.

Miss Marchant had enough *savoir faire* to depart very soon after luncheon. She only lingered long enough to look at the flowers which Mrs. Vansittart showed her, during which brief inspection the elder lady spoke to her very kindly.

"You are the head of the family, I am told," she said. "Isn't that rather an onerous position for one so young?"

"I was twenty-one last November, and I begin to feel quite old," answered Eve; "and then our family is not a very difficult one to manage. My sisters are very good, and accommodate themselves easily to circumstances. We live very simply. We have none of those difficulties with servants which I hear rich people talk about."

"You and your sisters look wonderfully well and happy," said Mrs. Vansittart, interested in spite of herself.

"Yes, I think we are as happy as people can very well be in a world where everybody must have a certain amount of trouble," Eve answered, with the faintest sigh. "We are very fond of each other, and we have great fun out of trifles.

We contrive to be merry at very little cost. Peggy and Hetty are very amusing. Oh, how they have eaten to-day! It will be a long time before they forget Lady Hartley's banquet."

"It does children good to go out now and then. They must come again very soon. I know my daughter will like to have them; but my son and I are going home almost immediately."

"Home." Eve looked a little crestfallen as she echoed the word. "You don't live very far off, I think, Mrs. Vansittart?"

"No. Only an hour's journey. We live in a region of pine and heather; and I have a garden and an arboretum, which are my delight. But our country is not any prettier than yours, so I mustn't boast of it."

"This is not my country," said Eve. "I feel like a foreigner here, though we have lived at the Homestead a good many years. Yorkshire is my country."

"But surely you must prefer Sussex. Yorkshire is so far away from everything."

The two girls came to Eve and hung about her. They had put on their gloves and little fur

tippets—spoil of rabbit or cat—and were ready for the start. Mrs. Vansittart noticed their coarse serge frocks, their homely woollen stockings and village-made boots. They were tidily clad, and that was all that could be said of them. A village tradesman's children would have been smarter; and yet they looked like young ladies.

"These are your two youngest sisters, and you have two older—five daughters in all," said Mrs. Vansittart. "Colonel Marchant ought to be very proud of such a family. And have you no brothers?"

"None in England," Eve answered, with a touch of sadness, and then without another moment's delay she began to make her adieux.

"I am going to see you home, if you will let me," said Vansittart, in the hall; "I heard you say that Colonel Marchant is at home, and I should like to seize the opportunity of making his acquaintance."

A faint cloud spread itself over Eve's happy face, and she was somewhat slow in replying. "I am sure father will be very pleased to see you."

“And I’m sure you won’t like father when you see him,” cried Peggy, the irrepressible.

“Peggy, how dare you?” exclaimed Eve.

“Well, but people don’t like him,” urged the resolute damsel. “He ain’t civil to people, and then we have to suffer for it; for, of course, people think we’re just as bad. He keeps all his good temper and pleasantness for London.”

“Peggy, Peggy!”

“Don’t Peggy me. It’s the truth,” protested this dreadful child; and then she challenged Vansittart holdly, “You like us, Mr. Vansittart, I know you do; but you’ll never be kind to us any more after you’ve seen father.”

This gush of childish candour was discouraging, and Vansittart’s heart sank at the awful doubt as to what manner of man this might be whom he was thinking of taking to himself as a father-in-law. Other people had spoken ill of Colonel Marchant, and he had made light of their disparagement; but this denunciation from the lips of the eleven-year-old daughter was far more serious.

“Perhaps the Colonel and I may get on better than you expect, Miss Peggy,” he said, with a

forced laugh; "and allow me at the same time to suggest that you have forgotten a certain commandment which tells us to honour our fathers and mothers."

"Are we to honour any kind of father?" asked Peggy; but Vansittart was not called upon to answer, for Hetty at that moment descrying a squirrel, both little girls rushed off to watch his ascent of a tall beech that grew on the open sward by which they were walking.

The walk was a long one, but though there was time for Vansittart and Eve to talk about many things, time for the two younger girls to afford many distractions, an undercurrent of thought about the man he was going to see ran beneath all that light surface talk, and made Vansittart's spirits dull and heavy.

"You must not think anything of what Peggy says," Eve apologized, directly after that little outbreak of the youngest born. "Father is irritable sometimes. He can't endure noise, and Hetty and Peggy are dreadfully noisy, and our house is so small—I mean from his point of view. And then he snubs them, poor young things, and they think him unkind."

"It is a way we have when we are young," answered Vansittart gently, "to take snubs rather too seriously. If our parents and guardians could only put themselves inside those small skins of ours they would know what pain their preachings and snubbings inflict."

"Father is much to be pitied," pursued Eve, in a low voice. "His life has been full of disappointments."

"Ah, that is a saddening experience," answered Vansittart, tenderly sympathetic.

His heart thrilled at the thought that she was beginning to confide in him, to treat him as if he were really a friend.

"His property in Yorkshire was so disappointing. I suppose land has gone down in value everywhere," said Eve, rather vaguely; "but in father's case it was dreadful. He was forced to sell the estate just when land in our part of the country was a drug in the market."

Vansittart had never heard of this cheapness of land in the East Riding, but he felt that if this account of things were not sternest truth, Eve Marchant fully believed what she was telling him.

“And then his horses, they all turned out so badly.”

“Ungrateful beasts.”

“You can understand that the life we lead at Fernhurst is not a very happy life for such a man as my father—a sportsman—a man whose youth was spent in the best society. It is hard for him to be mewed up with a family of girls. Everything we say and do must jar upon him.”

“Surely not everything. There must be times in which he can take delight in your society.”

“Oh, I’m afraid not. There are so many of us; and we seem so shallow and silly to a man of the world.”

“A man of the world. Ah, there’s the difficulty,” said Vansittart, slightly cynical. “That kind of man is apt to be miserable without the world.”

After this they talked of other things; lightly, joyously; of the country through which they were walking; its beasts, and birds, and flowers, and humble cottage folk; of the places he had seen and the books she had read, those fictions of the great masters which create a populace and a world of shadows for the dwellers in lonely

homes, and provide companions for the livers of solitary lives. They were at no loss for subjects, though that well-spring of polite conversation, a common circle of smart acquaintance, was denied to them. Their talk was as full of life and spirit as if they had had all London society to dissect.

It was teatime again by the time they arrived at the Homestead. The lamp was lighted in the family parlour; the round table was spread; the kettle was hissing on the hob; Sophy and Jenny were sitting on one side of the fire; and on the other side, in that armchair which Vansittart had occupied on a previous occasion, sat a man of about fifty, a man with clear-cut features, silver-grey hair and moustache, and a querulous expression of countenance.

"What in the name of all that's reasonable made you stay so late, Eve?" he grumbled, as his daughters entered. "Both those children will be laid up with influenza, I dare say, in consequence of your folly."

Only at this moment did he observe the masculine figure in the rear. He rose hastily to receive a visitor.

"Mr. Vansittart, father," explained Eve.

The two men shook hands.

"Girls are so foolish," said the Colonel, by way of apology for his lecture. "It was very kind of you to take care of my daughters on the dark road; but Eve ought not to have stayed so long."

"We left very soon after luncheon, father; but the days are so short."

"Not any shorter than they were last week. You have had time to become familiar with their shortness, and to make your calculations accordingly."

"I am sure you didn't want us, father," said the sturdy Peggy; "so you needn't make a fuss."

Colonel Marchant gave his youngest born a withering scowl, but took no further notice of the contumacious remark.

"Pray sit down, Mr. Vansittart, and take a cup of tea before you tramp home again. You must be a good walker to make so light of that long road—for I suppose you came by the road."

"I am country bred and born, Colonel Marchant, and am pretty well used to be on the tramp, on foot or on horseback."

“Ah, you live near Liss, Eve told me. Have you good hunting thereabouts?”

Vansittart ran through the lists of packs accessible from his part of the country.

“Ah,” sighed the Colonel, “you young men think nothing of prodigious rides to cover, and long railway journeys. You hunt with the Vine from Basingstoke—with the Hambledon from Bishop’s Waltham! You are tearing about the country all November and December, I have no doubt?”

“Indeed, colonel, I am not such a desperate sportsman as you appear to think. A couple of days a week content me, while there are any birds to shoot in my covers.”

“Ah, two days’ hunting and four days’ shooting. I understand. That is what an Englishman’s life should be, if he lives on his estate. Sir Hubert tells me you have travelled a good deal?”

“I have wandered about the Continent, on the beaten paths. I cannot call myself a traveller, in the modern acceptance of the word. I have never shot lions in Africa, nor have I ever bivouacked among the hill-tribes in Upper

India, nor risked my life, like Burton, in a pilgrimage to Mecca."

"Ah, the men who do that kind of thing are fools," grumbled the Colonel. "Providence is too good to them when they are allowed to come home with a whole skin. I have no sympathy with any explorer since Columbus and Raleigh. After the discovery of America, tobacco, and potatoes, the rest is leather and prunella."

"The Australian and Californian gold-fields were surely a good find," suggested Vansittart.

"Has all the gold ever found there made you or me a shilling the richer, Mr. Vansittart? It has reduced the purchasing value of a sovereign by more than a third, and for men of fixed incomes all the world over those gold-fields have been a source of calamity. When I was a lad, a family man who was hard up could take his wife and children to France or Belgium, and live comfortably on the income he had been starving on in London. Now, life is dear everywhere—even in an out-of-the-way hole like this," concluded the Colonel, savagely.

Vansittart observed him keenly as he talked, and was all the better able to do so, as the

Colonel was not given to looking at the person he addressed. He had a way of looking at the fire or at his boots while he talked. His enemies called it a hang-dog air.

He had not a pleasant face. It was a face wasted by dissolute habits, a face in which the lines were premature and deep, lines that told of discontent and anxious, angry thoughts. Vansittart could but agree with Hubert Hartley's estimate of Colonel Marchant. He was not a nice man. He was not a man to whom open-hearted, generous-minded men could take kindly.

But he was Eve's father.

Vansittart had been sorry for her yesterday ; sorry for her because of those narrow means which cut her off from the pleasures and privileges of youth and beauty. He was sorrier for her to-day, now that he had seen her father.

He took his tea by the family hearth, which had lost its air of rollicking happiness and Bohemian liberty. The five girls were all seated primly at the round table, silent for the most part, while the Colonel rambled on with his egotistical complaining, in the tones of a man injured and maltreated alike by his Creator and by society.

"Sir Hubert Hartley has a fine place at Redwold," he said, "and he got it dog-cheap. He is a very lucky man."

"He's an uncommonly good fellow," said Vansittart, "and he ought to be an acquisition to the neighbourhood."

"Oh, the neighbours take to him kindly," retorted the Colonel. "He's rich—gives good dinners and good wine. That is the kind of thing country people want. They don't ask too many questions about a man's pedigree when his cellar and his cook are good."

"My brother-in-law's pedigree is not one to be ashamed of, Colonel Marchant."

"Of course not, my dear fellow. Honest labour, talent, patience, invention, the virtues of which Englishmen are supposed to be proud. But you don't mean to tell me that the Hartleys date from the Heptarchy, or even came over with the Conqueror. There was a day—when I was a lad, unless my memory of social matters plays me false—when county people clung to the traditions of caste, and didn't bow down to the golden calf quite so readily as they do now."

Vansittart could but agree with Peggy as to

her father's demerits. He stole a glance at the child on the opposite side of the table, but she was too much absorbed in bread and jam to notice her father's speech, or the impression he was making. Eve had a pained look. He felt very sorry for her as he watched her restless fingers smoothing out the gloves which lay on the table before her, with a movement that told of irritated nerves.

He finished his cup of tea, and rose to go; yet lingered weakly, intent on resolving certain jealous doubts of his, if it were possible.

"I see you are a stickler for blue blood, Colonel Marchant," he said. "I conclude that is one of the reasons you like Mr. Sefton, who, as I hear in the neighbourhood, is by no means a general favourite."

"Did you ever hear of a man worth anything who was a general favourite?" grumbled the Colonel. "Yes, I like Sefton. Sefton is a gentleman to the marrow of his bones—the son and grandson and great-grandson of gentlemen. His ancestors were gentlemen before Magna Charta. If you want to know what good blood is, you have a fine example in Sefton—a staunch friend, a

bitter enemy, stand-offish to strangers, frank and free with the people he likes. He's the only man in this part of the country that I can get on with ; and I am not ashamed to confess my liking for him."

Vansittart watched Eve's face while her father was praising his friend. It was a very grave face, grave almost to pain ; but there was no confusion or embarrassment in countenance or manner. She stood silent, serious, waiting for her father to say his say, and for the guest to leave. And then, without a word, she shook hands with Vansittart, who made the round of the sisters before he was solemnly escorted to the porch by Colonel Marchant.

He walked home through the fine, clear night, by hedgerows powdered with snow, through a landscape which was somewhat monotonous in its black and white, past woods and hills, above which the frosty stars shone out in almost southern brilliancy.

No, he did not believe that Eve Marchant cared for Wilfred Sefton. There had been no emotional changes from white to red in the fair face he studied, only a serious and somewhat anxious

expression, as if the subject were painful to her. No, he had no rival to fear in Sefton ; and yet—and yet—there was some lurking mysteriousness in their relations, some secret understanding, or why those tears ? Why that confidential conversation, and those stray sentences, which seemed to mean a great deal ? “ I am truly sorry for your disappointment.” “ It was a false scent.” There must be some meaning deeper than the trivialities of everyday life in such words as these.

He thought, and gloomily, of Colonel Marchant as a possible father-in-law. A most unpleasant person to contemplate in that connection—a soured, disappointed man, at war with society, and quick to sneer at men whom he disliked only because they were more fortunate than himself. That he should sneer at Hubert Hartley, a universal favourite, who from boyhood to manhood had been known to all his friends and neighbours as “ Bertie,” a familiar style which testified to his popularity ! Would Bertie take the hounds on an emergency ? Would Bertie do this or that for the common weal ?—Bertie being always relied on for any act of generosity or good-fellow-

ship. It was intolerable that this out-at-elbows Colonel should presume to sneer at Bertie Hartley because the wealth which he dispensed so nobly had been won in the iron trade.

That second visit to the Homestead had a dispiriting effect, and again John Vansittart told himself that he would take his time; that having breathed no word of love in Eve Marchant's ear, he was free to carry her image away in his heart, and brood over it, and find out in the course of much sober meditation whether he really loved her well enough to sacrifice all worldly advantages, and to disappoint his mother and sister in the great act of marriage, that act upon which hangs the happiness or misery of all the after life.

A man who has few belongings, and who has been to those belongings as a hero, has need to give some consideration to his people's prejudices before he lead his bride home to the family hearth, where she is to take her place for ever in the family history, either as an ornament or a blot upon a fair record.

No, he would go no further. He would not be the slave of impulse and a foolish passion for

a lovely face. He was free to come to Redwold Towers whenever he pleased. He might see Eve Marchant as often as he pleased in the year that was so young. He would take his time.

And if, while he hesitated and meditated, some bolder wooer were to appear and snatch the prize—what then? Well, that was a risk which he must run; but he told himself that the chances were against any suitor for the daughter's hand while the father was to the fore. Colonel Marchant's children were heavily handicapped in the race of life.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FACE IN THE CROWD.

VANSITTART spent five weeks at Merewood, hunting a good deal, dining with some of his neighbours once a week or so, and occasionally entertaining them at dinner or luncheon; tiring himself prodigiously with long rides to cover, or railway journeys before and after the chase, and falling asleep of an evening by the drawing-room fire, lulled by the monotonous click of his mother's knitting needles, or the flutter of the turning leaves as she read.

Those fireside evenings after the chase in January and February were delightful to Mrs. Vansittart. She rejoiced with an exceeding joy at having brought her son safe and sound out of the cave of the syren, having no suspicion of those serious thoughts of the syren which occupied

his mind. There were half a dozen girls in the neighbourhood, two of them heiresses, any one of whom would be welcome to her as a daughter-in-law, for any one of whom she would have resigned her place in that household without a murmur, almost without a regret. But she shuddered at the idea of a girl brought up in a Bohemian fashion ; a girl who had suffered all the disadvantages which poverty carries with it ; the skimped education, the vulgarizing influence of petty household cares ; a girl whose father never went to church. Such a girl would be unspeakably distasteful to her. If Eve Marchant were to reign at Merewood, Mrs. Vansittart's grey hairs must go down in sorrow to the grave.

She rejoiced in her son's company, and was even reconciled to the perils of the hunting field, since hunting occupied his days, and prevented his running after Eve Marchant. If he was unusually silent and thoughtful by the fireside she ascribed silence and thoughtfulness to physical exhaustion. He was there, safe within her ken ; and that was enough. She took infinite pains to bring the girls she liked about her, and in her son's way, which was not easy, since Vansittart

was far afield nearly every day. She would invite one of her favourites to a friendly dinner, escorted by a young brother, perhaps—a proceeding which bored her son infinitely, since instead of sleeping or brooding by the fire he must needs play billiards with the cub, or put himself out of the way to amuse the young lady.

He was very fond of music of a broad dramatic style—loved grand opera, from Gluck to Meyerbeer and Verdi; but he had no passion for Grieg or Rubinstein, as expounded, neatly, elegantly, with ladylike inexpressiveness, by his mother's protégées; and it seemed to his ignorant ear that all his mother's protégées played exactly the same pieces in precisely the same manner.

If perchance he spent an afternoon at home, he invariably found one of those selected vestals in morning-room or drawing-room when he went to five-o'clock tea, that meal being one which his mother loved to share with him, and at which dutiful affection constrained his presence whenever he was on the premises. All the charm of that unconstrained half-hour of chat between mother and son was scared away by the presence

of a young lady, albeit the most admirable of her sex. His mother's favourites were very nice girls, every one of them, and only two out of the six were painfully religious. He liked them all well enough, in the beaten way of friendship; but the handsomest and most attractive of them left him cold as marble. He had gone beyond the season of easily kindled fires. He had passed the age at which a man falls in love once in six weeks. His heart was no longer touch-paper. A few months ago he had believed that he would spend his days as a bachelor, had calculated the manifold advantages of remaining single, with an estate which for a single man meant wealth, but which for a man with wife and family would only mean a modest competence.

He grew so weary at last of those social tea-drinkings and those eminently domestic evenings, that before the hunting season was nearly over he suddenly announced his intention of going to London. It was an understood thing between his mother and himself that the house in Charles Street was always ready for him. The house-keeper left in charge had been his nurse, and administered to his comfort with unwearying

devotion. She was an excellent cook, by force of native talent rather than by training and experience, and, with a housemaid under her, kept the house in exquisite order. These two women, with Vansittart's valet, an Italian, able to turn his hand to anything, made up an efficient bachelor establishment.

To Charles Street, therefore, Vansittart repaired early in the Lenten month of March. He had been at some trouble to resist the inclination which would have taken him to Redwold Towers, rather than to London. It would have been so easy to offer himself to his sister for a week; and at Redwold it would have been so easy to see Eve Marchant; so difficult, perhaps, to avoid seeing her, since Lady Hartley, who was, above all things, cordial and impulsive, had told him in one of her letters that she had taken a fancy to Miss Marchant, and had invited her and one of the sisters to Redwold very often.

"As a wife for you, she is impossible," wrote Maud Hartley. "Pray remember that, Jack. Mother and I are ambitious about your future. We want you to look high, to improve your position as a small country gentleman, to make

your mark in the world. But, although quite impossible as your wife, as a human being Miss Marchant is charming, and I mean to do all I can in a neighbourly way to make things pleasanter for her. The father is shockingly neglectful, spends the greater part of his life in London; but that is perhaps an advantage for his daughters, for when he is at home Eve is a slave to him, has to worry about his dinners, and fetch and carry for him, and try to amuse the unamusable, as Madame de Maintenon said. I gather this not from any murmurings of Eve's, but from the young sisters, who are appallingly outspoken."

Vansittart had pledged himself to spend the Easter holidays at Redwold; so he resisted the promptings of inclination, and swore to himself that he would not try to see Eve Marchant before Easter. The interval would then have been long enough to test his feelings, to give him time for thought, before he took any fateful step, and perhaps to throw him in the way of hearing some more specific account of Colonel Marchant's character and antecedents. There is no place, perhaps, in which it is more difficult to

get a faithful account of a man than in the village where he lives. There, everything is exaggerated—his income, if he is rich; his debts, if he is poor; his vices, eccentricities, and shortcomings, in any case.

Although it was the Lenten season, and although the churches of London were filled with Lenten worshippers, the town looked bright and animated, and there were plenty of votaries in the temples of pleasure—theatres, picture galleries, concert halls—and plenty of snug little dinner-parties to which a man in Vansittart's position was likely to be bidden. He had a wide circle of acquaintance, and was popular with men and women, accounted a clubbable man by the former, and an eligible parti by the latter. Even the women who had no matrimonial views for daughters, or sisters, or bosom friends, still affected Jack Vansittart's society. He had plenty to say to them, was always cheery and cordial, and never seemed to think himself too good for the particular circle in which he found himself.

He was dining one evening en petit comité with an old college chum and his young wife;

the husband a rising barrister; the wife an accomplished woman, and a marvellous manager, able to maintain a pretty little house in Mayfair on an income which a stupid woman would have found hardly enough for Notting Hill or Putney, and to give an appetizing dinner, daintily served, and unhackneyed as to menu, for the cost of the average housekeeper's leg of mutton and trimmings.

While the cheery little meal—the cutlet en papillote, the guinea-fowl, the tomato à l'Italienne, and Parmesan soufflé—was being discussed, a servant brought in a coroneted envelope for the hostess, which being opened, contained a box for Covent Garden, where there was an early season of Italian Opera.

“For to-night,” said Mrs. Pembroke. And then she read aloud from the letter, “‘I find at the last moment that I can't use my box. Do go if you are free. The opera is *Faust*, with a new “Margherita.”’ That's rather a pity,” sighed the lady, folding up the letter.

“Why a pity?” asked Vansittart. “Why shouldn't you go? I dare say your box will hold me as well as Tom, so you need have no

conscientious scruples on the ground of inhospitality."

"Oh, there will be plenty of room. It is Lady Davenant's box, on the grand tier. But Tom asked you for a quiet evening, a long talk and smoke, and perhaps an adjournment to the Turf for a rubber. I'm afraid you'll be dreadfully bored if I take you to the opera instead."

"Pray don't think so badly of me. If it were Wagner perhaps I might be less sure of myself. There are bits I enjoy in his operas, sunny isles of melody in the vast ocean of scientific harmonies, but I confess myself a tyro in that advanced school. Gounod's *Faust* I adore. We shall be in time for the Kermess scene, and the new 'Gretchen.' Pray let us be off."

A cab was sent for, and the trio packed themselves into it, Mrs. Pembroke sparkling with pleasure. She was passionately fond of music, and she had been looking forward to a solitary evening by the drawing-room fire, while her husband and his friend sat smoking and prosing together in the barrister's ground-floor den.

The house was thin, this premature opera

season not having been a marked success. Lady Davenant's box was near the proscenium, a spacious box, which would have accommodated six people as easily as three. Vansittart sat in the middle, between his host and hostess. Tom Pembroke, who was no music lover, dozed in the shadow of the curtain, agreeably lulled by melodies which were at least pleasant to him, if only from their familiarity.

The cast was not strong, but the "Margherita" was very young, rather pretty, and sang well. Vansittart and Mrs. Pembroke were both interested.

It was near the close of the Kermess scene that the lady asked her companion, "Do you ever look at the chorus? Such poor old things, some of them! I can't help thinking how weary they must be of singing the same music season after season, and tramping in and out of the same scenes—banquets where there is nothing to eat, too, and then going home to bread and cheese."

"Yes, it must be a hard life," assented Vansittart; "all the trouble of the show, and none of the glory."

And then he took a sweeping survey of the gay

crowd, peasants, soldiers, citizens, feasting and rejoicing in friendly German fashion under the open sky. Yes, Mrs. Pembroke was right; most of the chorus were middle-aged, some were even elderly—withered old faces, dark skins which even bismuth could not transform to fairness. Italian eyes, dark and glowing, shone out of worn faces where all other beauty was lacking.

Suddenly among all those homely countenances he saw a young face, young and beautiful, a face that flashed upon him first with a rapid thrill of recognition, and then with an aspect that struck into his heart like a dagger, and when that sharp pang was over left a heaviness as of lead.

It was Fiordelisa's face. He could not be mistaken. Nay, the fact was made certainty as he looked, for he saw that the girl recognized him. She was gazing upward to the spot where he sat; she was talking about him to the woman who stood next her, indicating him with her expressive gestures, her Southern gesticulation.

Was she telling that stolid, heavy-looking woman that the man yonder had slain his fellow-creature in a tavern row; that he was a murderer? She would put it so, no doubt—she whose lover he had killed.

If she were saying this the stolid woman received the statement very placidly. She only nodded, and shrugged her shoulders, and then nodded again, while Fiordelisa talked to her rapidly, with energetic emphasis. No, surely no woman would stand and shrug and nod as this woman shrugged and nodded, at a tale of murder.

Then Lisa looked up again at him, beaming with smiles, her dark eyes sparkling in the gas-light; and then her turn came to swell the chorus; and then the curtain fell, and he saw her no more.

It was as much as he could do to get through the interval before that curtain rose again. Tom Pembroke wanted him to go out for a stroll in the foyer, for a drink of some kind. "I would rather stay with Mrs. Pembroke," he said, full of wild surmises, prepared for a mysterious knock at the box door, and the appearance of a policeman from over the way to take him in custody at Lisa's instigation; prepared for anything violent or tragic that might happen to him. What might not happen when the hot-blooded Southern nature was in question? What bounds would there be for the revengeful passion of such a girl as Fiordelisa, who had been robbed by his act of

her lover and protector, her possible husband? She had talked of her Englishman's promise of marriage with an air of innocent security, the remembrance of which smote him sharply, recalling her light-hearted gaiety at the restaurant and at the opera, her grief as she flung herself upon her lover's corpse. And he, who had thought never to see her again, never even to know her fate, found himself face to face with her, recognized by her, having to answer to her and to society for the deed which he had done.

With these thoughts in his mind, with his ear strained for the knocking at the door, he had to talk small talk to Mrs. Pembroke, to counterfeit amusement at her criticism of the people in the stalls—the man with two strips of hair combed in streaks over a bald head, the woman with corpulent arms bared to the shoulder, the country cousins. He had to laugh at her little jokes, and even to attempt one or two smart sayings on his own account.

The knocking came, and he almost started out of his seat.

"It can't be Tom," said Mrs. Pembroke. "He

never comes back until after the curtain is up, and sometimes not till the act is nearly over."

Vansittart opened the box door, and a treble voice said, "Ices, sir."

He made way for the young woman with the tray of ices, and insisted upon Mrs. Pembroke taking one of those parti-coloured slabs which have superseded the old-fashioned rose-pink strawberry ice. He sat down again, ashamed of his over-strained nerves, and looked at the great curtain, wondering whether in all that wide expanse there were any gimlet holes through which Fiordelisa's ardent eyes might be watching him. The curtain rose, and the act began; but Vansittart had no longer any ear for the music he loved. His whole attention was concentrated upon the chorus singers. He watched and waited for their coming and going, searched out Lisa's familiar figure amidst the throng that crowded round Valentine's dying form, Margherita's despair. He singled her out again and again as the troupe moved about the spacious stage—now on one side, now on the other, in the foreground or the background, according to the exigencies of the scene. He watched the stage till

the curtain fell on the apotheosis of the pardoned sinner; and then he woke as from a dream, and began to wonder what he must do next. Something he must do assuredly, he told himself, as he helped Mrs. Pembroke with her wraps, and heard her chatter about the performance, which she denounced as second-rate, declaring further that she had been taken in by Lady Davenant's gift of the box. Something he must do; first to ascertain what Fiordelisa's intentions might be—whether she would denounce him to the police; next to make whatever atonement he could make to her for the loss of her lover. He was not going to run away this time, as he had done at Venice. He had been seen and recognized. He would be watched, no doubt, as he left the theatre. This girl would make it her business to find out his name and residence. Even if he wanted to elude her, the thing would be impossible. He had been sitting there all the evening in a conspicuous box on the grand tier, and he had to get away from a sparsely filled theatre.

Again there was a knock at the box door. It came while he was putting on his overcoat, and before Mrs. Pembroke had begun to move off.

It was a boxkeeper this time, with a letter.

"For you, sir," he said, handing it to Vansittart, after looking at the two men.

"An unaddressed envelope," chirruped Mrs. Pembroke; "this savours of mystery."

Vansittart put the letter into his pocket without a word. His most ardent desire at that moment was to get rid of the Pembrokes.

"Can I be of any use in fetching a cab?" he said in the hall.

"You can stop with my wife while I get one, if you don't mind," said Pembroke.

Happily there were plenty of cabs that night, and it was only the carriage people who had to wait. Mr. Pembroke came back for his wife in two or three minutes.

"I've got a four-wheeler," he said. "You'll come home with us for a smoke and a drink, won't you, Van?"

"Not to-night, thanks; it's late—and—and—I've some letters to write."

"Good night, then. I'm afraid you've been bored."

"On the contrary. I was never more interested in my life."

CHAPTER IX.

“THOUGH LOVE, AND LIFE, AND DEATH SHOULD
COME AND GO.”

VANSITTART tore open the blank envelope under one of the lamps at the back of the vestibule, while the crowd about the doors was gradually melting away, and the question “Cab or carriage?” was being asked, often with a sad want of discrimination on the part of the questioners. The letter was from Lisa.

It was in English, mixed with little phrases in Italian, badly spelt and badly written, but quite plain enough for him to read.

“I knew you directly,” she wrote, “and your face brought back the past—that dreadful night, and all I suffered after the of him death. Come to see me, I pray you. It must that we talk

together. Come soon, very soon. I live with la Zia, in Stone Court, Bow Street, No. 24B, quite near the Opera House. Come to-night if you can.—Her humble servant,

“FIORDELISA.”

He stood with the letter in his hand, pondering.

Should he do what the letter asked him? Yes, assuredly; although to obey that summons was to place himself unreservedly in Lisa's power. He was in her power already, perhaps. She might be having him watched at that moment. She might have made her arrangements promptly, so that he should be watched and followed when he left the theatre, and his name and address discovered.

In any case, whatever risk there might be in going to Fiordelisa's lodging, he did not for a moment hesitate. In his remorseful thoughts of the man he had killed, the bitterest pang of all had been his thought of Fiordelisa and her shattered life, her dream of happiness darkened for ever, her prosperity changed to desolation and bitter want. Again and again he had told

himself that the memory of his sin would sit more easily upon him could he but secure Lisa's comfort, dry her tears for the lover who was to have been her husband, shelter her from the chances of the downward road which the feet that have once turned astray are but too ready to tread.

He had found her, which was more than he had hoped, and had found her earning her bread in a legitimate manner, and living with the aunt who was in some wise a protector, although, remembering that lady's easy manner of regarding her niece's former position, there was perhaps not overmuch security in such a duenna.

He walked across Bow Street, and speedily found Stone Court, which seemed a quiet haven from the roar and roll of carriages in the street outside; a highly respectable retreat, consisting for the most part of private houses, one of which—wedged into an obscure corner, where a narrow alley, like the neck of a bottle, cut through into another street—proved to be 24B.

La Zia herself opened the door in answer to Vansittart's knock, and welcomed him with a cordiality which took his breath away.

“Welcome, Signor. She said you would come, but I was doubtful that you would trouble about her or me,” she said, in Italian, and then, in very tolerable English: “Do me the favour to walk upstairs; it is rather high—il secondo piano. She knew you again in an instant. She has such eyes.”

They ascended the narrow staircase, lighted only by the Zia’s candle. The door of the front room on the second floor was open and Fiordelisa stood on the threshold, in the light of a paraffin lamp, dressed in a shabby black gown, and with her splendid hair rolled up on the top of her head in a roughened mass.

She held out both her hands to Vansittart, and welcomed him as if he had been her dearest friend. The aunt had fairly astonished him, but the niece was even more astounding.

“I knew you would come,” she exclaimed. “I knew you would not turn your back upon the poor girl whose life you made desolate.”

And then she burst into a tempest of sobs. She flung herself on to the little horsehair sofa, and sobbed as if her heart would break; whereupon la Zia tumbled into an armchair, and sobbed in concert.

What could Vansittart do between two fountains of tears? He could only patiently abide till this passionate grief should abate, so that he might speak with the hope of being heard.

"I am deeply distressed," he said at last, when these lamentations had subsided. "I have never ceased to repent the act that bereaved you—both—of a friend and protector. I dared not go back to Venice—lest—lest the law should weigh heavily upon me. I had no means of communicating with you. I knew neither your names nor your address, remember. I had no means of helping you. I could do nothing to lighten the load upon my conscience—nothing. You must have thought me an arrant coward for running away and leaving you to suffer for my sin?"

"If you had stopped you would have been put in prison—perhaps for ever so many years," said la Zia, with a philosophical air.

Fiordelisa had dried her tears, and was looking at him graciously, with almost a smile in the soft Italian eyes.

"Your going to prison would not have brought him back to life," she said. "I am glad you got away. Poor fellow! he was so fond of me—

and so jealous! Ah, how jealous he was! It was foolish. I had done no harm. A little pleasure at Carnival time, while he was away! What a pity that he should come back to Venice that night, and find me at the Florian with you! We ought not to have gone to that caffè. He always went there—it was just the likeliest place for him to find us. But then I did not know he was coming back to Venice so soon.”

The lightness of her tone, thus easily accepting the tragic past, surprised him, so strangely did her speech of this moment contrast with her passionate sobs of a few minutes ago. That she should tolerate his presence, that she should threaten him with no vengeance, that she should, in a manner, welcome him as a friend, was stranger still; and he had to remember that this lightness was characteristic of the Italian nature; he had to remember that in Rome a noble lady and her daughter will go out to dine at a restaurant because it is so dull and sad at home where the husband and father lies dead, or a mother will take her daughters to the opera to revive their spirits after a brother's untimely death.

It was a relief to him, naturally, to find a philosophical submission to Fate where he had expected to find a thirst for his blood, a stern resolve that the law should claim from him the uttermost atonement it could exact. It was a tremendous relief to find himself sitting between aunt and niece—while they eat their frugal supper from a tin box of mortadello, a bundle of radishes, and a half quartern loaf—listening to their account of their lives after his victim's death.

“He was buried next day,” said la Zia; “a very pretty funeral. It was a lovely day, and the gondola was full of flowers, though flowers are dear in Venice. Lisa and I, and the Padrona from the house where we lived, went with him to the cemetery, where it was all so still and happy-looking in the sunlight. Lisa tried to throw herself into his grave, but we would not let her. Poor child, she was so miserable, and we thought of the day before when we were returning from the Lido in your gondola——”

“And when the lagoons looked enchanted in the rosy sunset,” said Lisa; “and our dinner at the Cappello Nero, and the champagne, and the pastiti, and the opera afterwards, and the beads

you gave me. I have the beads still. I wore them to-night in the ball scene. Did you notice them?"

"Indeed, no, Poverina. I was too full of thoughts of you to notice your necklace."

"Ah, you were surprised to see me, weren't you—after so long? And was not I surprised to see you? I was looking at all the faces, the pretty dresses, the jewels, like faces in a dream, for they are there every night, and they never come any nearer, or seem any more real; and then in an instant, out of the unreality, your face flashed upon me—your face and the memory of that happy day and evening, that dreadful midnight. Are you sorry to see us again?" she asked, naively, in conclusion.

"Sorry, Lisa? no. I am glad, very glad; for now I hope I may be able to make some atonement to you and your aunt."

"Atonement! but how? You cannot bring him back to life. While we sit here, he is lying in San Michele, where the gondolas with the black flags are his only visitors, where nothing but sorrow and death ever enters. You cannot bring him back to life."

“Alas, no, Fiordelisa ; but I may do much to make your life easier. I can make sure that you and your aunt shall know no more poverty and deprivation.”

“Ah,” sighed la Zia : “we knew both after that good Signor Smitz was carried to San Michele. He had never been rich, mark you ; but while he lived there was always enough for the coffee and macaroni, and for a stufato on Sundays, and a flask of Chianti that lasted all the week. We did not waste his money, and he used to praise his little Lisa as the cleverest manager and best wife a man ever had. And she would have been his wife, mark you, had he lived. Oh, he had promised her again and again, and he meant to keep his word. She would have been an English gentleman’s wife—all in good time.”

“All in good time,” echoed Lisa, “and my son would not have been fatherless.”

“Your son !” exclaimed Vansittart.

“Ah, you do not know,” said la Zia ; “her baby was born half a year after his father’s death. It was the late autumn when the bambino came. The leaves were all dying off the

vines, the strangers were all leaving Venice, the boats were bringing in the winter fuel, and the cold winds were creeping up from the Adriatic and blowing round all the corners of the Calle. We were very poor. There was a little money in the house when he died—and there was more than enough in his purse when he fell to pay for his funeral—but when the last lira was gone there was nothing but to go back to the lace-making, both of us, and work for the dish of polenta and the garret that lodged us. We did not want to go back to Burano, to see the old faces and hear the old comrades talk about us, after we had lived like ladies and worn velvet gowns, so we went to work at the factory in Venice, and we lived in one little room in the Rialto, right up in the roof of an old, old house, where we could see nothing but the sky ; and there Lisa's baby was born, a beautiful boy. Ah, how proud Signor Smitz would have been had he lived to see that lovely infant !”

“ Is the boy living ? ” asked Vansittart, gently.

“ Living ! Yes, he is in the next room ; he is the joy of our lives,” answered the aunt.

Lisa started up from the supper table, with

her finger on her lips, and went across the room, beckoning to Vansittart to follow. She opened a door, cautiously, noiselessly, and led him into a bedroom, where, by the faint glimmer of a night-light, he saw a boy lying in a little cot beside the ancient four-post bed, a boy who was the image of one of Guido's child-angels—full round cheeks, with a crimson glow upon their olive clearness, lips like Cupid's bow, long dark lashes fringing blue-veined eyelids, and dark brown hair waving in loose curls about the broad forehead. Truly a beautiful boy! Vansittart could not withhold his praises of that childish sleeper.

"You are very fond of him," he said gently, as Lisa stooped to rearrange the blanket over the child's round and dimpled arm, pressing a kiss upon the fat little hand before she covered it.

"Oh, I adore him. He is all in the world I have to love, except la Zia."

"And you have had a hard time of it, through my fault," said Vansittart, gravely, as they went back to the sitting-room.

It was one o'clock by the little American clock on the chimney-piece—one by the clock of the church in Covent Garden, which pealed its single

stroke with solemn sound as they resumed their seats by the shabby round table, in the light of the paraffin lamp ; but, late as it was, neither Lisa nor her aunt seemed in any hurry to get rid of their visitor, nor did he mean to go until he had made a compact with them—a compact which should set his mind at rest as to the future.

“How did you come from the lace factory at Venice to the stage of Covent Garden?” he asked. “This is a long way for you to have travelled, without a friend to help you along.”

“We had a friend,” answered Lisa. “My good old music-master. We lost sight of him when our troubles began ; but he met me one day as I was leaving the factory—it was when my baby was three months old—and he stopped to talk to me. He was shocked to see me so thin and pale, and when I told him how poor we were—la Zia and I—he asked me why I did not turn my voice to account. He always used to praise my voice when Signor Smitz asked him how I got on with my education. I had a voice that was worth money, he said. And now in our poverty he was very good to us. He gave me

more lessons, without a sous, to be paid for only when I should be earning plenty of money ; and after he had taught me a good many choruses in Verdi's operas, he gave me a letter to the Impresario at Milan, and he lent us the money for the journey to Milan, and once there all went well with us. I was engaged to sing in the chorus, and I sang there for two seasons, and la Zia and I were able to live comfortably and to save money, until one day, when the Scala was closed, an English Impresario came to Milan, to engage singers for the London season, and I, who had always wanted to go to London, went to him, and asked him to engage me, and it was all settled in a few minutes. We have been a year and a half in England, la Zia and I, sometimes travelling with the opera company, but mostly in London."

"And you have made wonderful progress in our language, Signora."

"Don't call me Signora," she said softly. "Call me Fiordelisa, as you did that day at Venice."

"Tell me how you both like our England."

The elder woman shrugged her shoulders,

elevated her eyebrows, and flung up her hands in the expression of boundless admiration.

“Wonderful, wonderfullissimo,” she exclaimed. “The streets, the long, broad streets, and splendid, splendid shops; the carriages, the fine-dressed people, the smoke, the roar of wheels, the everlasting noise. When I look back, and think of Burano, it is like a dream of quiet; a tranquil world set in the bosom of the waters; a cradle for sleep; life that is half slumber. Here every one is awake.”

“But your London is not beautiful,” said Lisa. “This court is not like Venice. It is liker than your big, noisy streets; but when one looks up here the sky is murky and grey—not like the strip of blue above the Calle. If I could live where I could see water from my window—even your dull, dark river—I should be happier; but to be away from the sound and the sight of waters. That was hard even at Milan, which was still Italy.”

“There are places in London where you might live in sight and sound of the river,” said Vansittart. “We cannot offer you anything like your lagoons; we have no mountains like the Friuli

range for our sunsets to glorify ; but we have a river by which people can live if they like."

"Not if they like, but if they are rich enough," argued Lisa. "We asked if we could have a lodging near the river ; but the people at the theatre told us such lodgings are dear—they are not for such as us."

"We will see about that," said Vansittart ; and then he went on more seriously, "I want to make a compact with you and your aunt. I want to come to a clear understanding of what we are to be to each other in the future. Are we to be friends, Lisa ?"

"Yes, yes, friends, true friends," she answered eagerly.

"And you forgive me for—what was done that night ?"

"Yes, I forgive you. The fault was not all yours. He insulted you—he struck you—and you were maddened—and the dagger was there. It was a fatality. Let us think of it no more. We cannot bring him back. It is best to forget."

"You know, Lisa, that you have it in your power to blight my life—to tell the world what I did that night—to give me up to the strong

arm of the law to answer for the life I destroyed. You could do that if you liked. Do you mean to do it?"

"No," she said resolutely.

"And you, Signora," to the aunt, "are you of the same mind as your niece?"

"In all things. Lisa is much cleverer than her poor old aunt. I do as she does."

"But some day, Fiordelisa, you might change your mind," urged Vansittart. "Women are capricious. You might take it into your head to betray me—to tell people of that tragedy in Venice, and that I was the chief actor in it."

"Not for the world would I tell anything that would injure you," she said.

"Do you mean that, Lisa?"

"A thousand times yes."

"Promise then, thus, with your hand in mine," taking her hand as he spoke; "promise by the Mother of God and by His Saints that, come what may, you will never tell how I stabbed an unarmed man in the Caffè Florian. Promise that as I am frank and true with you, so you will deal frankly and fairly by me, and will do no act and will say no word to my injury."

“I promise,” she said, “by the Mother of God and by His Saints. I promise to be loyal and true to you all the days of my life.”

“And you, Signora?” to the aunt.

“What she promises I promise.”

“Why, then, thank God for the chance that brought us three together again,” said Vansittart, earnestly, “for now I can make my atonement to you both with an easy mind. There is nothing I will not do, Lisa, to prove that my remorse is a reality, and not a pretence. You would like to live by the river, child? Well, it shall be my business to find you a home from which you shall look upon running water, and hear the splash of the tide. Your voice is your fortune. Well, it shall be my business to find you a master who shall train you for something better than singing in a chorus. As you are loyal to me, Lisa, so, by the heaven above us, will I be loyal to you. All that a brother could do for a sister will I do for you, and deem it nothing more than my duty when it is done.”

“Ah, what a noble gentleman,” cried la Zia, wiping her tearful eyes, “and how gracious of the blessed Mary to give us so generous a friend!

Little did I expect such fortune when I rose from my bed this morning."

"And now, ladies, I must bid you good night," said Vansittart. "I hope to call on you to-morrow afternoon with some news of your future home. You will not mind living two or three miles from your theatre. There are trams and omnibuses, and a railway to carry you backwards and forwards," he added.

"We should not mind even if we had to walk to and fro. We are good walkers," answered Lisa. "We lived a long way from la Scala. Ever so far off, on the other side of Milan."

"To-morrow, then. A rivederci."

Two o'clock struck while he was walking to Charles Street, with an easier mind than he had felt for a long time. It seemed to him that his burden was lightened almost to a feather-weight now that he knew the fate of these women. They were not destitute, as he had often pictured them. They had suffered a little poverty, but no more than was the common lot of the class from which they had sprung. And it was in his power to make ample reparation to them. He would do more for Lisa than that dead man would ever

have done. He would put her in the way of an honourable career. Whatever talents she had should be cultivated at his cost. He would not degrade her by foolish gifts—but he would spend money freely to further her interests, and he would keep her feet from straying any further upon that broad road she had entered so recklessly.

He could but wonder at the lightness with which she accepted her lover's fate, and forewent every idea of retribution. Not so, he told himself, would an Englishwoman bow to the stroke of destiny, if her best-beloved were slain. And then he wondered whether, in all this world, near or far, there was any one, besides Fiordelisa, who had loved John Smith, and who was now mourning for him.

CHAPTER X.

“AS THINGS THAT ARE NOT SHALL THESE
THINGS BE.”

BEFORE two o'clock next day John Vansittart had been up and down more stairs than he ever remembered to have mounted and descended in a single day. He had inspected flats in the neighbourhood of the Strand, and flats at Milbank, and flats at Chelsea; and finally, after much driving to and fro in a hansom, and interviews with several house-agents, he had discovered a third floor in a newly erected house near Cheyne Walk which seemed to him the ideal home for Fiordelisa and her aunt. The house stood at a corner, and the windows and balcony of this upper story commanded a fine view of the river and Battersea Park; while to the eastward appeared the Abbey and the

Houses of Parliament, and southward rose the Kentish hills and the Crystal Palace. The flat contained three good rooms, with a tiny kitchen at the back. The balcony was architectural, and looked solid and secure. There was a fascinating oriel window at the corner of the principal room, which projected so as to command the west. Nothing could have been brighter or more airy, and the agent who took Vansittart over the rooms assured him that the house was substantially built, and altogether satisfactory. No doubt most agents would say as much about most houses, but the appearance of this house, the thickness of the walls, and the solidity of the woodwork went far to justify the agent's praises.

The rent was eighty-five pounds a year, all told ; and this was a rent which came well within the amount that Vansittart was prepared to pay. He was thoroughly in earnest in his desire to be of substantial service to Lisa and her aunt. He was not a rich man ; but he told himself that he could spare two hundred a year for the solace of his conscience ; and he was prepared to impoverish himself to that amount for the rest of his life. Yes, even in that dim future when he should

have sons at the University and daughters to marry, and when hundreds would be of much more consequence to him than they were now. Two hundred a year would he sacrifice as a penance for his sin ; and he contemplated the sacrifice with so much the more satisfaction because of his cordial liking for the impulsive peasant girl whose fate had become interwoven with his own.

He found aunt and niece at home, and expectant of his arrival. He had exchanged his hansom for a brougham from a livery stable, which would accommodate three people.

"I am going to take you to see the home I have chosen for you, Lisa," he said ; "that is to say, if you would rather make your home in London than in Italy."

"Yes, yes ; ever so much rather," she answered, eagerly. "London is a grand city. You live in London, don't you ?"

"Not always. I am seldom here more than a month or two at a time. I am not a lover of cities."

She looked disappointed at this reply.

"You will come and see us sometimes, when you are in London ?" she asked.

“Certainly. I shall look in upon you now and then, to see how you and la Zia are getting on in your new surroundings. And now let us go and look at the apartments I have chosen. Perhaps you will not like my choice.”

La Zia protested that this was out of the question. His choice must be perfection. It was not possible for so noble a gentleman to err in taste or judgment.

Fiordelisa was dressed for going out. She was poorly clad in her well-worn black gown and a little cheap black net bonnet, with pale pink roses in it, but neater than Vansittart had seen her before. La Zia had also dressed herself tidily, and looked far more matronly and reputable than he would have thought possible, remembering the flaunting ruby plush and coppery gold chain in Venice. The little boy had been committed to the care of the landlady, who was prodigiously fond of him, Lisa told Vansittart.

The drive by St. James's Park, Buckingham Palace, and Eton Square was a delight to the Venetians. They exclaimed at every new feature of the way. The houses, the soldiers, the trees, the lake, the palace, and even the long, solemn,

unbeautiful square impressed them. The magnitude of everything was so astounding after Venice. The wide expanses and seemingly illimitable distances filled them with wonder. They had been surprised at the extent of Milan ; but this London looked as if it could swallow twenty Milans.

The brougham drove along the King's Road, turned into Oakley Street, and brought them suddenly face to face with the Thames in one of its pleasantest aspects. The sun was shining on the river, the trees were purple with swelling leaf-buds, the old houses of Cheyne Walk looked bright and gay in the sunlight.

"Oh, how pretty!" cried Lisa, and Lisa's aunt was quite as enthusiastic.

"There is one thing I must ask you," said Vansittart, "before we come to business with the house-agent. I don't know the surname of either of you ladies."

"My name is Vivanti," said the aunt, "and Lisa's is the same. She is my brother's daughter."

"Then Lisa shall be Madame Vivanti, and you—shall we say Mademoiselle?"

"As you will. I have never been married. The man I loved and was to have married was a

fisherman, and his boat was wrecked one stormy night between Venice and Chioggia. I never cared for any one else ; so I lived with my brother and his wife, and worked for them and with them. He has a swarm of children, of whom Lisa is the eldest."

"Then you have a number of brothers and sisters, Lisa," said Vansittart. "Can you reconcile your mind to living in England and seeing them no more ?"

Lisa shrugged her shoulders.

"There are too many of us," she said ; "each of us felt what it was to be one mouth too many. The mother died six years ago, worn out like an old shoe that has tramped over the stones through all weathers. My father would beat us for a word or a look. It was a hard life at Burano. I don't want to go back there—ever. And your name, Signor ; you have not told us that."

"My name ! Ah, true !"

He hesitated for an instant or so. Could he trust them with the knowledge of his name and surroundings ? He thought not. They were women, impulsive, uneducated, therefore uninstructed in the higher law of honour.

"My name is Smith," he said.

"How strange! The same as his," exclaimed Lisa.

"It is a common English name."

The carriage stopped at a street corner, and Vansittart led the way up the brand-new staircase to the brand-new third story. Lisa and her aunt were in raptures. Everything was so pretty, the paint, the paper, the ceilings, the windows and balconies, the fireplaces, with their tasteful wooden mantelpieces, and shining flowery tiles, and artistic little grates, warranted to consume a minimum of coals and give a maximum of heat.

There was a somewhat spacious sitting-room, with five windows, including the oriel in the western corner. Opening out of this were two small bedrooms; and on the other side of the landing there was the doll's-house kitchen, furnished with many shelves and conveniences for cooking and washing up, a kitchen as ingenious in its arrangements, and almost as small as the steward's cabin on a Jersey steamer.

"Now, Madame Vivanti," said Vansittart, when the inspection had been made, addressing Lisa with some ceremony, "if you and your aunt

are pleased with these rooms, and if you would like to make your permanent home in London, turning your musical gifts to as much account as you can, I shall be happy to furnish them for you, and to pay the rent always, or at any rate as long as you remain unmarried—and”—in a graver tone, “lead a virtuous and reputable life, making no hasty acquaintances, and keeping yourself to yourself until you know this country well enough to make a wise choice of friends. Would you like me to do this?”

“How can you ask such a question? Ah, you are too good and generous to me. I shall be as happy as a queen—to live in rooms like these, with that lovely view over the river. It will be like living in a palace. But pray don’t call me Madame Vivanti. I feel as if you were angry with me.”

“Foolish child! you know better than that,” he said, smiling at her. “I am full of friendliest feelings towards you and your aunt. But I must not call you by your Christian name. Men and women do not do that in England, unless they are blood relations or affianced lovers. You must be Madame Vivanti in future.”

Lisa pouted and looked distressed, but said nothing. La Zia expressed her heartfelt gratitude, for her niece chiefly, for herself in a lesser degree. The kitchen seemed to impress her most of all. There was a hot plate, on which she could cook a risotto or a stufato, or a dish of macaroni, and all those various messes which are savoury to the Italian palate.

“You will keep house for your niece, and take care of her boy”—Vansittart approached this subject with a certain hesitation totally unshared by the boy’s mother—“until he is old enough to go to school. Lisa—Madame Vivanti—will have to work hard at her musical education if she means to rise from the ranks of the chorus. I will look about for a respectable singing-master, who is not too famous to teach on moderate terms, and I will pay him for a course of lessons—to last, say, six months. By that time we shall know what Madame’s voice is made of.”

“Call me Si’ora, if you won’t call me Lisa,” said the young woman, impetuously. “I won’t be called by that formal Frenchified Madame.”

“It shall be Si’ora, then, if that will content you. And now, Si’ora, and la Zia, tell me that

you are satisfied with me, and that what I am pleased and happy to do for you will be in some sense an atonement for—what I did that night.”

Lisa burst into a flood of tears.

“You are too generous; you do too much,” she cried. “He would never have done so much, not even if he had been rich. He thought anything good enough for us—after, after he began to get tired of us. You are a hundred times better than he was——”

“Lisa, Lisa,” remonstrated the elder woman, “that is a hard thing to say.”

“Oh, I know; I loved him once—passionately, passionately. I prayed the Holy Mother every night and morning to make him keep his word and marry me. He gave me my velvet gown. Yes, I loved him passionately. He gave me lessons on the mandoline, and promised he would have me trained to be a lady. Yes, I loved him. I shall never forget the day he first came into the factory at Burano, and looked at us all as we sat at our work, and began to talk to me in Italian. There are so few Englishmen who can speak a single sentence of Italian, and his voice was so soft and kind, and he asked me questions about

my work. But afterwards, when we were in Venice, he was not always kind ; not as kind or as gentle as you are."

She cried a little more after these simple utterances ; and then she dried her tears, and la Zia comforted her, and they all three went downstairs and drove to the house-agent's office, where Vansittart introduced Signora Vivanti, of the Royal Italian Opera, Covent Garden, as a tenant for the third floor of Saltero's Mansion, he himself, Mr. John Smith, vouching for the respectability of the ladies, and paying a year's rent in advance with some bank-notes he had ready for the transaction. This handsome payment, and the fact that the flat was unfurnished, reconciled the agent to the vagueness of a referee who only described himself as John Smith, of London.

This done, and the key of the third-floor flat having been handed over to him by the agent, Vansittart put Lisa and her aunt into the carriage and bade them good-bye.

"You will be driven back to Stone Court," he said, "in plenty of time for your work at the theatre. I will see about furnishing the new rooms to-morrow, and everything ought to be

ready for you in a week. You had better give your landlady a week's notice."

"She will be sorry to part with Paolo," said la Zia. "She is as fond of him as if she were his grandmother."

"You will come to see us in a week?" said Lisa, earnestly, as he shut the carriage door.

"In a week your new home will be ready," he answered; "I will come or write. Good-bye."

He waved his hand to the driver, whom he had instructed to take the ladies back to the entrance of Stone Court. The carriage moved off, Lisa looking at him earnestly, with something of a disappointed air, to the last.

"Poor child! Did she think I was going to give them a dinner at a restaurant, as I did that day in Venice?" he asked himself, as he walked towards Piccadilly. "What a curious, impulsive, infantine nature it is; made up of laughter and of tears; taking the ghastliest things lightly, and yet with the capacity for passion and grief. Well, it is a good thing, it is a happy thing for me to be able to mend the broken life, and to give happiness where I had brought misery."

He devoted the best part of the following day to the business of furnishing. It was his first experience in that line since he had taken over his predecessor's sticks at Balliol, adding such luxuries and artistic embellishments as his youthful fancy prompted. He had been interested then with the undergraduate's pleasure in his emancipation from the Etonian's dependence. He was interested now. He felt as if he had been furnishing a doll's house for the occupation of a talking doll, so childishly simple did Lisa's intellect seem to him. He took a pleasure in the task, and exercised taste and common sense in every detail.

The rooms were ready in less than a week, for the furniture was of the simplest, and all ready to his hand at a West End upholsterer's. He had but to make his selection from a variety of styles, all graceful, artistic, and inexpensive. At the end of the week he sent the same livery brougham to carry aunt and niece and boy to their new home. He sent Fiordelisa a little note by the coachman.

"Your house is ready. I shall call at four o'clock to-morrow afternoon to take a cup of tea

in your new drawing-room, and to hear if you approve of my furnishing."

He received one of Lisa's ill-written letters by the next morning's post:—

"The rooms are lovely; everything is as pretty as a picture or a dream; but why did you not come this afternoon to let us thank you? Tomorrow is so far off."

This little letter induced punctuality. He was at Lisa's door on the stroke of the hour. The afternoon light was shining in at the south windows. The sun shone golden over the western river. There were daffodils in a glass vase on the little white-wood table in the oriel, and the new cups and saucers that he had chosen were set out upon a bamboo table with many shelves. Aunt and niece were neatly dressed in their black merino gowns, and the little boy was playing with a set of bricks in a corner of the room, silently happy. Aunt and niece poured out their gratitude in a gush of Italian and English, curiously intermixed. Never was anything so pretty as this house of theirs; never so noble a benefactor as Vansittart. He could but feel happy in seeing their happiness. He had never

been so near forgetting that scene of blood in the Venetian caffè.

He stayed for an hour or so, sipped half a cup of straw-coloured tea which Lisa fondly believed was made in the English manner, and then departed, promising to call again when he had found a singing-master.

"I shall be very particular in my choice, Signora," he said gaily. "First and foremost, the Maestro must be old and ugly, lest you should fall in love with him; next, he must be a genius, for he is to teach you in a year what most people take three years to learn; and he must be a neglected genius, because we want to get him cheap."

"I wish the good little man who taught me the mandoline were in London," said Lisa.

Vansittart could not echo that wish, since the good little man must needs learn the story of that midnight in the caffè, and he wanted no such Venetians in London.

"We shall find some one better than your mandoline professor," he answered; "and that reminds me I have never heard you play on your mandoline."

"Would you like?" asked Lisa, sparkling with almost as happy a smile as he remembered when she sat at the little table in the crowded Black Hat, before the beginning of trouble.

The mandoline was hanging against the wall, decked with a bunch of ribbons, red, white, and green. She took it down, and seated herself by the window, in the sunlight, and began to tinkle out "Batti, batti," in thin, wiry tones, while the boy left his bricks on the floor and came and stood at her knee, open-mouthed, open-eyed, intently listening.

"Sing, Lisa, sing," said la Zia.

Lisa laughed, blushed, looked shyly at Vansittart, as if she feared his critical powers, and then began that tenderest melody in a fresh young voice, whose every note was round and ripe and full of power. Nor was the singer lacking in expression; the tender legato passages were given with a pleading pathos that touched the listener almost to tears.

"Bravo, Signora mia!" he cried, at the end of the song. "Your voice is worlds too good to be drowned in a middle-aged chorus. To my ear you sing 'Batti, batti,' as well as the most famous

Zerlina I ever heard. Two years hence, or sooner perhaps, we shall have the new Venetian prima donna, Signora Vivanti, taking the town by storm. But we must make haste, and find our Maestro, able to coach you in all the great operas."

He had to explain that word coach to Lisa, whose knowledge of English had made very rapid progress during her residence in the country, and who had a quick apprehension of every new word or phrase.

He left her, charmed at the discovery that she could sing so well, and that her future was therefore so full of hope. He was pleased with her gentleness, her simplicity, her frank acceptance of his friendly services, pleased most of all by the thought that by his protection of these two lonely women he was in some measure atoning for his crime. Yet there were points upon which his conscience remained unsatisfied—questions that he wanted to ask—and to this end he dropped in upon the little family on the third floor three or four times before the Easter holidays.

He was not long in finding the ideal singing-

master. An application to one of the chief music publishers and concert-givers brought him in relation with a Milanese musician, who played the 'cello at the new Apollo Theatre, on the Embankment—the very man Vansittart wanted, ugly enough to satisfy the most jealous husband, elderly, but not old enough to fall asleep in the middle of a lesson; a man of excellent character and recognized talent, but not one of Fortune's favourites, and therefore willing to give lessons on moderate terms.

This gentleman's opinion of Signora Vivanti's voice was most encouraging, and his manner of expressing that opinion seemed so modest and conscientious that Vansittart was fain to believe him.

"La Signora is absolutely ignorant of music," said the Professor, "but if she is industrious and persevering she has a fortune in her throat."

Lisa took very kindly to the Professor, and showed no lack of industry. She was an obedient pupil, and worked very patiently at her piano, which was a much harder ordeal for the untrained fingers than the solfeggi were for the bird-like voice. All her hours unclaimed by

the theatre were free for study, since la Zia bore the whole burden of household cares, the marketing and cooking, and the looking after the little boy.

One afternoon, shortly before Easter, Vansittart, calling after a week's interval, was admitted by Lisa instead of by her aunt, who usually opened the door.

La Zia had gone into London in quest of certain Italian comestibles, only procurable in the foreign settlements of Soho, and Fiordelisa was alone with her boy. It was an opportunity that Vansittart had been hoping for, the chance of questioning her about the dead man, whose manes, though in some wise propitiated as he thought, had a trick of haunting him now and again.

"Lisa," he began gently, forgetting that he had forbidden himself that familiar address, "there is something that I want to talk about—if—if I were sure it would not grieve you too much. I want you to tell me—more—about the man you loved—the man I killed. I know what sorrow his death brought upon you; but, tell me, was there no one else to grieve for

him? Had he no kindred in England—father, mother, brothers, sisters?”

“I think not,” she answered gravely. “He never spoke of any one in England, never at least as if he cared for any one. His mother was dead. I know as much as that. For the rest, he told me hardly anything about himself; except that he had been away from England for a good many years, and that he was not fond of England or English people.”

“He was called John Smith. Do you think that was his real name?”

“I don’t know. I never heard of any other.”

“And in all the time you were associated with him did he write no letters to English friends, nor receive letters from England?”

“None that I ever saw.”

“And after his lamentable death were there no inquiries made about him? Did no one come to Venice to trace a missing friend or relative?”

“No one. Except la Zia and me there was no one who cared—no one who was any the worse for his death. He had only us in all the world, I think.”

"But when he came first to Burano he came with people—friends—you told me."

"He came with a party of Americans who were staying at the Hôtel de Rome. They were nothing to him. They had left Venice when he came the second time."

"Do you know where he had been living before he came to Venice?"

"Living nowhere—wandering about the earth, he told me, like Satan. That is what he said of himself. He had been in Africa—in America. He called himself a rolling stone. He told me that it was only for my sake he was content to live six months in the same place."

"Had he no friends in Venice?"

"None, but the people with whom he used to play cards at the *caffès* of an evening. Sometimes he would bring two or three strangers to our salon, and they would sit playing cards half the night, while la Zia and I used to fall asleep in a corner, and wake to find the morning light creeping in through the shutters. Sometimes he won a heap of gold in a single night, and then he was so kind, so kind, and he would give us presents, la Zia and me, and we had champagne for dinner

next day. Sometimes, but not often, he had bad luck for a whole night, and that used to make him angry."

"Did he never tell you where he was born and reared, or what kind of life he led before he took to wandering over the face of the earth?"

"Never. He did not like to talk about England or his early life."

Never! There was no more to be heard. There was infinite relief to Vansittart's mind in this blank history. The life he had taken was an isolated life—a bubble on the stream of time, that burst, and vanished, and that was all. He had broken no mother's heart; he had desolated no home; he had made no gap in a family circle. The man had been a worthless nomad; and his death had brought sorrow upon no one but this Venetian peasant and her kinswoman.

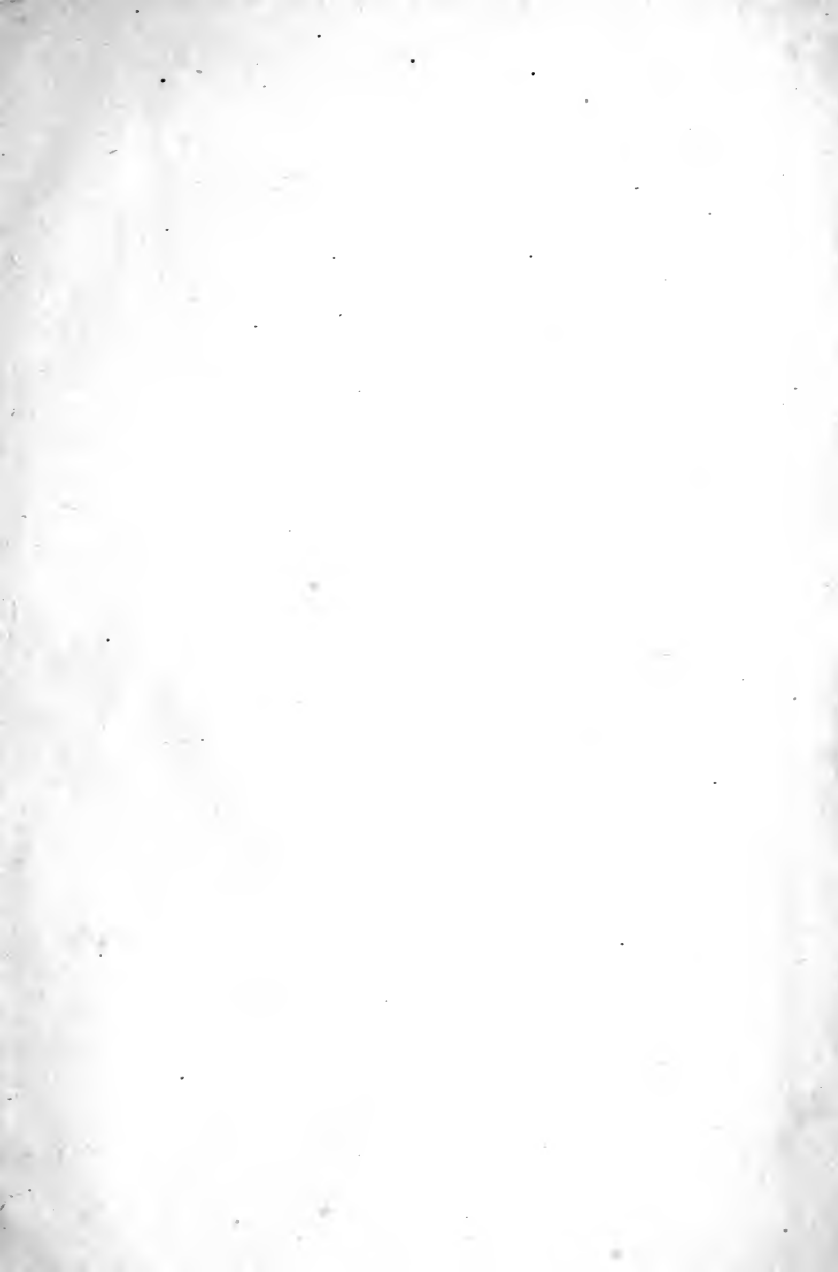
Their wounds were healed; their lives were made happy; and so there was an end of his crime and its consequences. Fate had been very good to him. He walked back to Charles Street that afternoon with his burden so far lightened that he thought he might come eventually to forget that he had ever taken a fellow-creature's

life, that he had ever carried about with him any guilty secret.

Easter was close at hand, and he was to spend Easter at Redwold Towers, within walking distance of Eve Marchant's cottage. Easter was to decide his fate, perhaps.

END OF VOL. I.









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